MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY

Magazine
Issue #36

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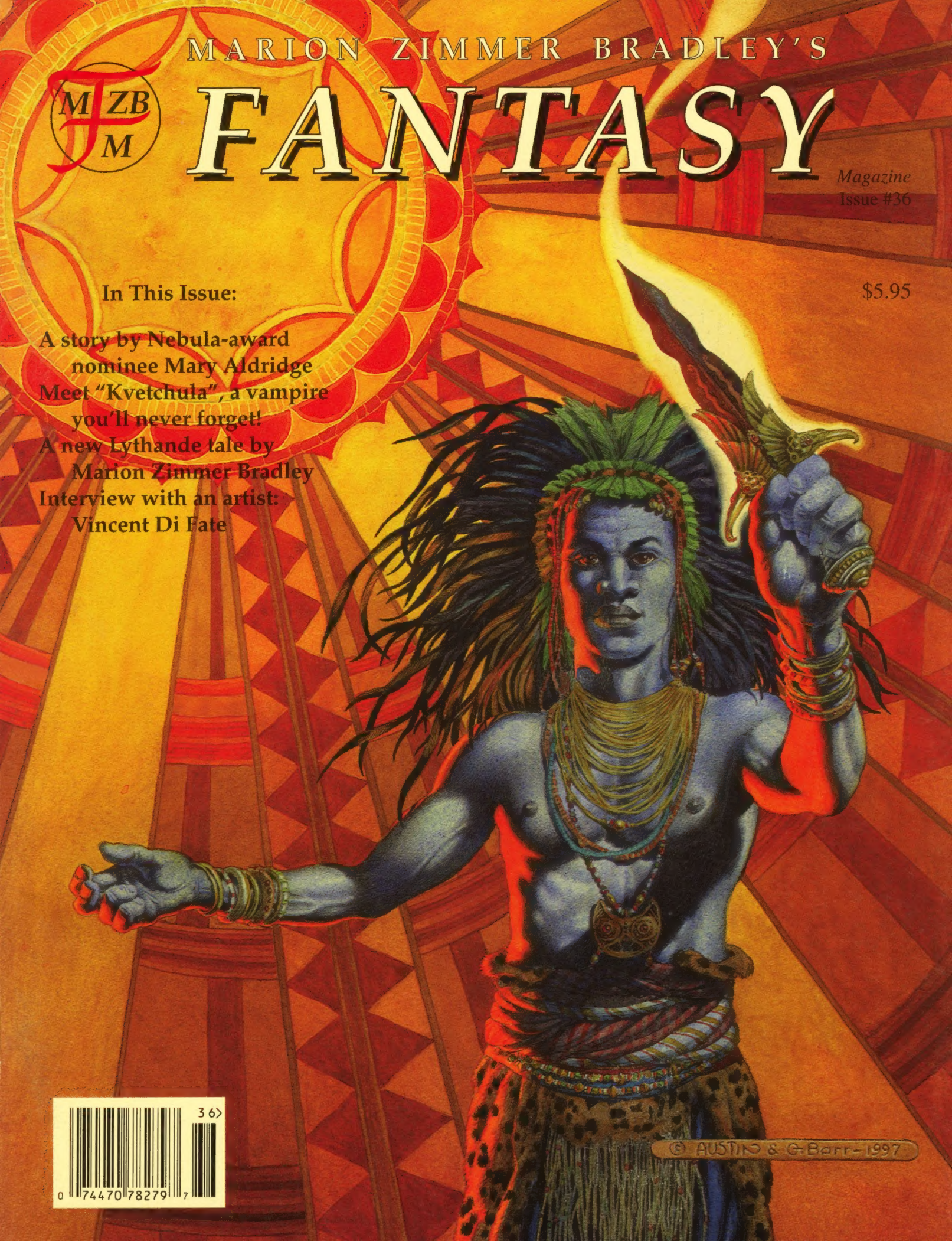
In This Issue:

A story by Nebula-award nominee Mary Aldridge
Meet "Kvetchula", a vampire you'll never forget!
A new Lythande tale by Marion Zimmer Bradley
Interview with an artist: Vincent Di Fate



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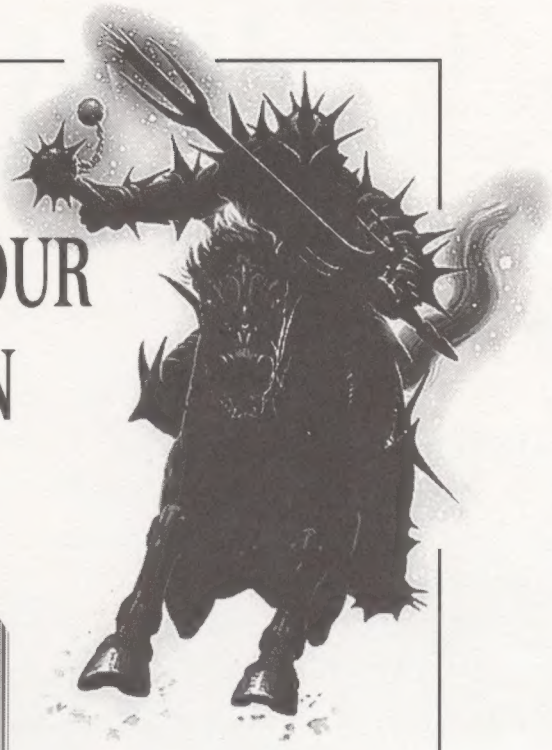

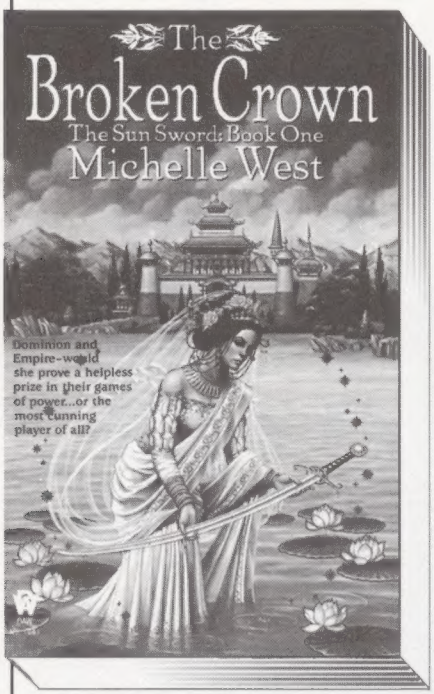
The
Broken Crown
The Sun Sword: Book One
Michelle West
Dominion and Empire—would she prove a helpless prize in their games of power...or the most cunning player of all?

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The Sun Sword: Book One
Michelle West

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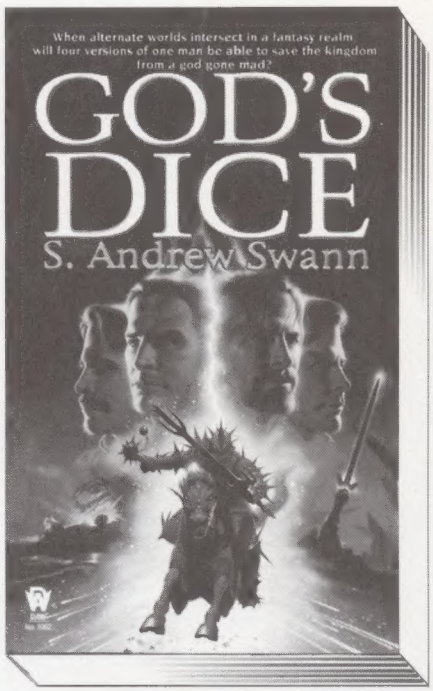
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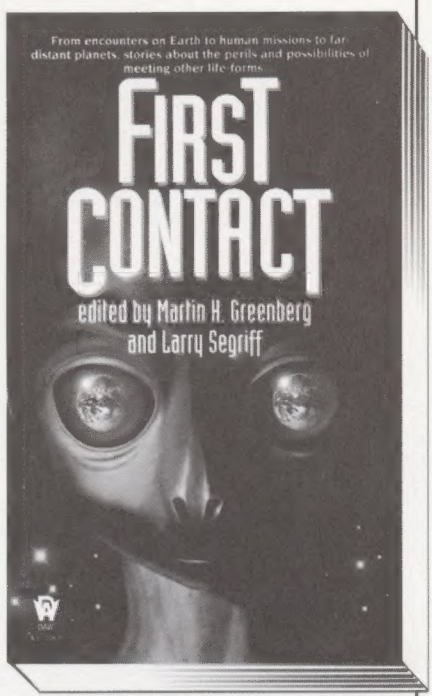
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DAW BOOKS

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
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EDITORIAL

Why won't people believe me?

Again and again I tell people that what I really need is something short and funny; but far too much of what I get are long cover-length stories.

But one thing I've said they remember all too well. I once suggested counting 200 words a page. Now I know that with the margins of today's computers and printers there are between 250 and 300 words to a page.

But people today seem to think there are 200 words to a page — or so they seem to want me to believe they think.

Maybe they are just trying to write longer stories, and think I won't notice. I've said before and I'll say again; most cover stories are done by prearrangement with me and Rachel, and we have these stories bought ahead for a long time.

Steven Piziks's story was not done that way; when I read the story I thought it was terrific. Then our cover story or the artwork for that issue or something — I forget just what — didn't make it on time; which gave me a chance to print "Thin Man" — but that wouldn't happen twice in many years. Stories that good don't come along every day; if they did, I'd find some way to print them, you'd better believe!

Marion Zimmer Bradley

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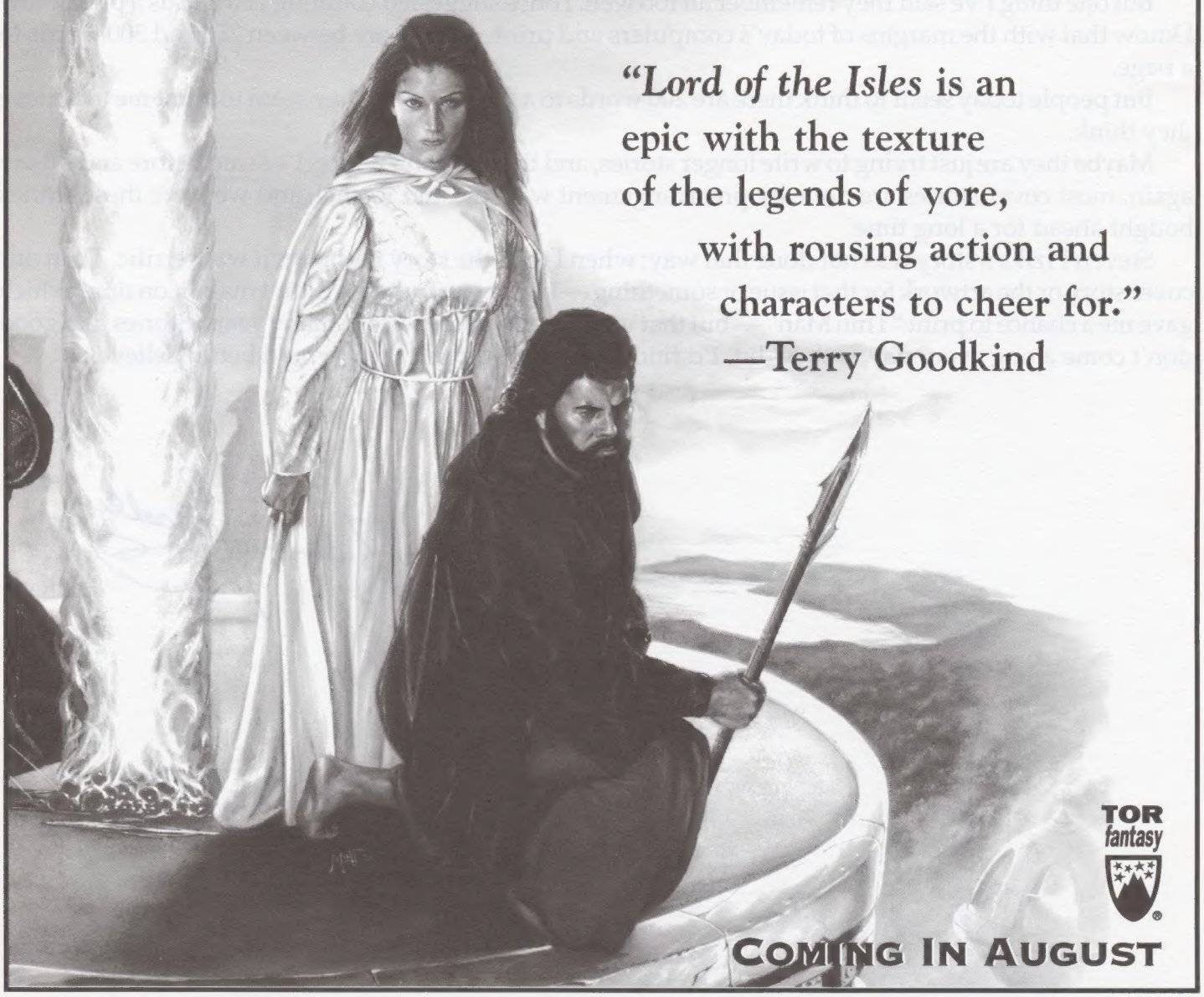

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—Terry Goodkind

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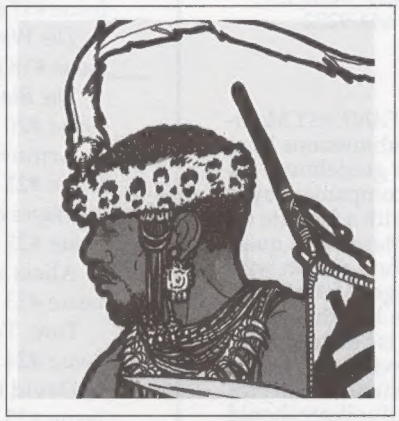

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The Knife That Makes Men

by Mary C. Aldridge

The leopard circled me slowly, switching its spotted tail.

"A leopard's soul"— I spoke loudly, so that every smirking Daloro servant in the great Hall could hear —"a leopard's soul is made of sparks. A smith-lord fears nothing made of fire." I stooped and scratched the cat's head.

The leopard rocked back on its haunches in surprise. It whined uncertainly. I gazed into its eyes and scolded: *Little brother of the burnt coat, don't even think about challenging a smith-lord of Nkai*! Then I patted the cat's head and straightened up again. "Now I will see the Knife."

The Regent of Daloro looked annoyed. I had seen his right hand flash up when I stooped to scratch the cat, and I had seen the hand fall again, foolishly, when Udeko realized that the cat was not going to attack me. Not that the leopard would ever have been allowed to do so, of course. Udeko had permitted the beast to enter the great Hall of the Kings simply to enjoy my fear.

I repeated, "I must examine the Knife."

Udeko's face hardened, the gold circles painted around his eyes making him resemble some sort of fantastic beast himself. He made a swift gesture to the cat, which departed the Hall reluctantly, looking over its shoulder at me. Udeko glared in silence until the beast was gone; then, still not looking me in the face, he said, "The ceremony is not until sunset."

"I am not going to cut *my nephew, your King*! with a knife I've never held before!" I took a step toward him, and he stared at me with a kind of amazement that reminded me that this was still the most powerful man in all Daloro. I surrendered the step but not my insistence. "A great weapon has a soul. Some are wilder than others, and I must know this Knife of yours before I use it!" A thought came to me, and I flung it out as quickly as it came: "Or do you mean to ignore your brother's command?"

Someone among the servants hissed like spit on hot iron. Udeko's eyes in their golden circles glittered at me, but he answered coolly enough, this courtier-warrior-prince: "I am a faithful servant to the kings of Daloro, my late brother and his son — however much I regret it." With that, he strode across the Hall's silky floor matting to the soapstone manhood bed where the young king would lie at sunset. Next to the bed was an ebony stand, and on the stand, a slim box of golden wood.

Udeko crooked his finger at me.

I would have liked to break his arm, or even better, stalk out of the Hall, but I had no choice: I was bound by my word, and I must know the Knife before I used it. But it galled me to *go* at his *come*.

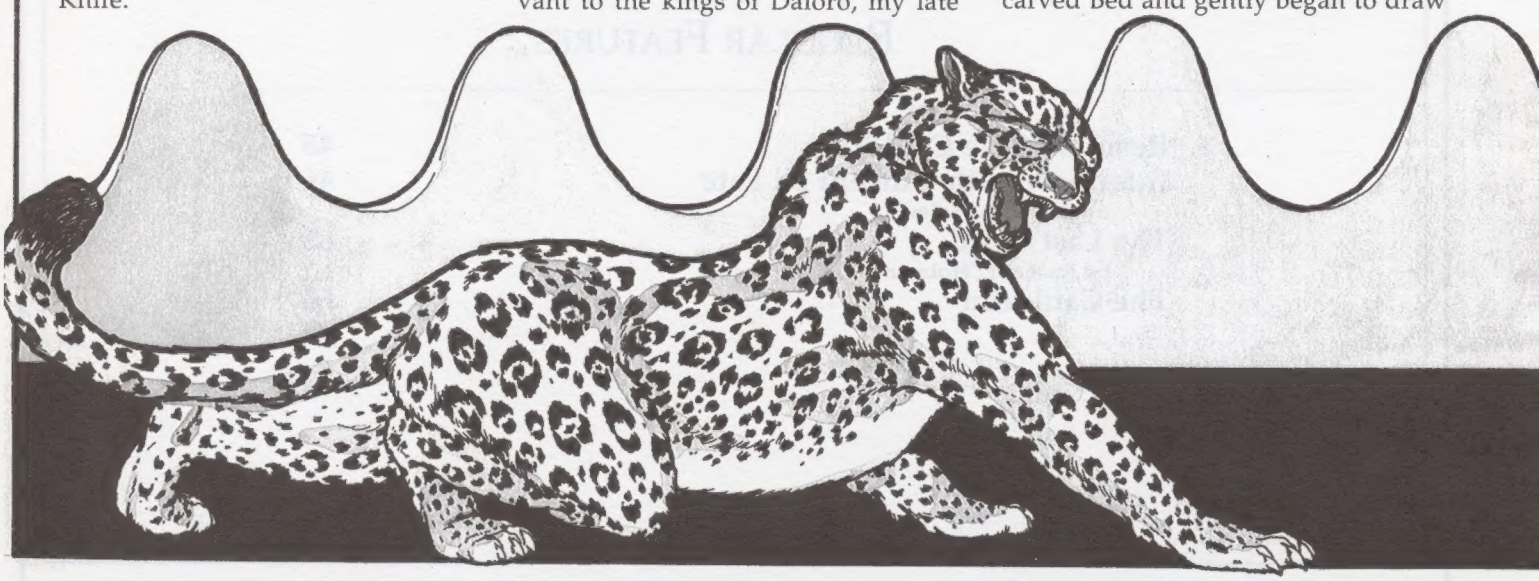
The slim box was carved all over with the signs of Daloro's royal family — Udeko's family, and my nephew's.

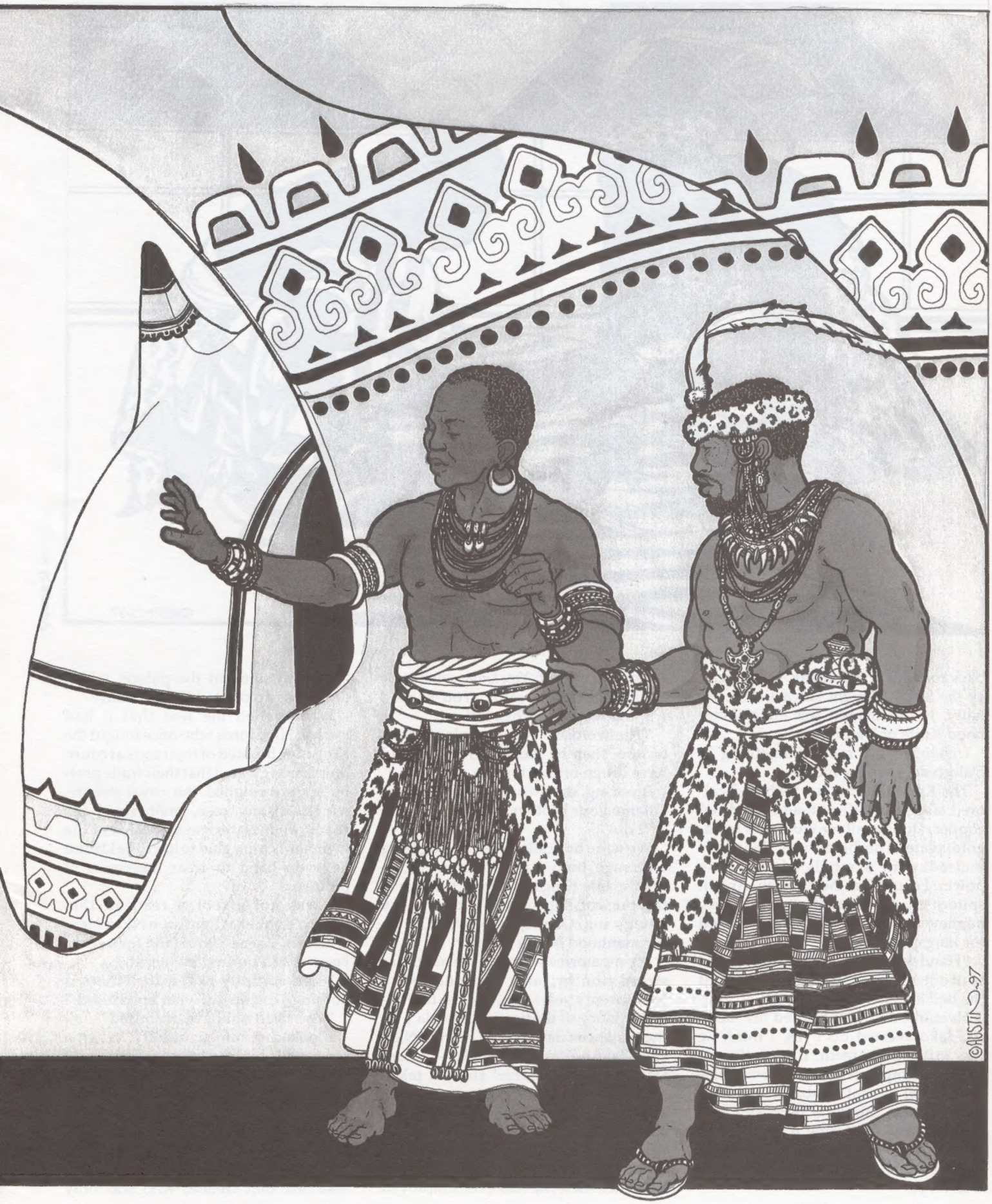
The Regent laid his hand on the lid of the box. "This is the Bed of the Knife, the Royal Manhood Knife of Daloro. By law"— the gold-circled eyes glanced sideways at me; did a Nkai smith-lord understood *law*? —"by law, no other blade can give manhood to a King's heir."

"I know." I folded my arms across my chest.

Again the gold-circled eyes flashed. No doubt Udeko had expected me to be impressed. Too bad. I had been tricked into coming to the conquerors' city, and nothing in it impressed me. Including the manners.

Grim-faced, Udeko lifted the lid off the Knife's Bed, with both hands, formally. He placed the lid beside the carved Bed and gently began to draw





Artwork by Alicia Austin

Artwork by Alicia Austin

back folds of crimson silk — *the sheets on the Bed*, I thought sarcastically. Finally, he uncovered the Royal Manhood Knife of Daloro.

I changed my mind. Something in Daloro *did* impress me.

The Knife gleamed on its blood-colored silks, magnificent, all sacred red copper, shining silver wire, and solid-gold plate. The blade was delicately incised with symbols of awesome power; I could feel their breath. And in spite of myself, I felt a flash of pride: *my* nephew would know this blade forged for kings.

"Handsome," I allowed. "Let me —" I put out my hand, and Udeko snatched the Bed away.

Heat like a forge's burned my face.

Udeko averted his eyes. I think he was gritting his teeth; I think the act had been impulsive, and he was cursing himself for that self-betrayal. I *knew* what he was thinking, because I had heard people muttering it ever since I arrived at court: *The weak hand of the conquered should never touch the Manhood Knife*!

I said to myself: *You know you have to do it*. To Udeko I said, "You know I wanted no part of this, but —"

"Then refuse!" The words leaped out of him; then he looked as if he could have bitten off his tongue.

Ignoring the insult, I said coldly, "Blame your brother."

"I do!"

We were both silent, both struggling with rage, both, I am sure, remembering the late King of Daloro, brother to the present Regent and father to my sister's son, Obada, who would lie on the manhood bed at sunset.

My memories were beaten as soft as sword iron by now: the conquest of Nkai twenty years ago, and the humiliating policy of unification. Obada's father had been determined to weld Nkai and Daloro into one people — under Daloro rule, of course! He had taken my own sister as one of his royal wives — which even I admitted was preferable to taking her for a concubine; he had carried off sons of Nkai lords to be brought up at his court for positions of influence there; he had even employed Nkai craftsmen in the palace, which doubtless accounted for its beauty.

What galled me was that it had *worked*. Nkai lords who once fought the King now boasted of their sons at court. Merchants gloated that their trade profits far outweighed the royal tribute, which, in any case, maintained the roads and waterways. Besides, the merchants were glad to have the Daloro navy on hand to clear the rivers of pirates.

I was not a fool. I realized that Daloro's yoke sat lightly on Nkai. Nevertheless, it was a yoke, and for twenty years it had burned my neck!

I said abruptly to Udeko, "There is nothing I can do but what I promised."

"You need not have promised!"

I looked at him scornfully. When a king sends his royal messenger to ask, however politely, that you serve as smith-lord to your sister's son when the time comes, you do not ignore the fact that the request comes from a king. Besides, it had never occurred to me that I would have to leave Nkai. I had assumed that Obada, who was only

seven years old at the time, would come to me when he was fifteen, and I would take him to the sacred forest. I had even looked forward to it. Nkai custom requires that a smith-lord give the manhood stroke to his sister's sons, who are his own true sons, after all.

So, ignorant of the devious ways of kings, I had forged a blade of promise, incised with pattern-vows. I broke the blade in half and sent one half away with the King's messenger.

Less than three months after this, the conquering lion of Daloro went to his ancestors. The lion's brother, Prince Udeko, sent me word that the late king had selected Obada as his heir.

The rest of Nkai was ecstatic. *I* went out to my forge and beat a chunk of iron until it was as thin as east country silk. I knew very well that kings do not travel to conquered provinces to receive their manhood. It was *I* who would have to go up to Daloro to redeem my word.

Well, eight years had passed, and now I was here to do what I had promised — if the Regent of Daloro could get control of himself. I waited.

Not very long.

Udeko held out the Bed of the Knife to me.

Respect, I reminded myself: the Knife was worthy of honor, Daloro or not.

I made the Nkai smith's sign of respect to a great weapon. Udeko frowned. I tried to ignore him as I prepared my soul to greet the Knife's soul. I drew a deep breath, reached out, and wrapped my fingers around the Knife's hilt — and flung the weapon to the floor.

Udeko shouted as I leaped back, away from the thing I had touched. The prince dropped the Knife's Bed on the ebony stand and lunged at me, his fist coming straight for my face.

I threw up my arm to block his attack and smashed my own fist into his surprisingly hard gut. The servants screeched like parrots; several of them grabbed me, shouting "Treason!" and "Desecration!"

I shouted at Udeko, "*You* are the traitor! Is this how you keep your promise?"

"You *dare* insult the Knife! Nkai filth —!" Udeko shot me one murderous look from his gold-ringed eyes, then dropped to his knees and reached for the blade.

"*Don't touch it!*"

He had good reflexes: his hand froze in mid-air, even as he stared up at me in affronted astonishment.

My heart was pounding. I repeated, softly, "Don't touch it. That is not the Manhood Knife of Daloro."

"Of course it is!"

I shook off the clutching servants and squatted on the floor facing Udeko. The weapon lay between us, bright and evil. I said, "I know fire and fire's children. Whatever that thing is, it cannot be the Manhood Knife of Daloro."

Wary, like an apprentice after his first bad burn, I touched my fingertips lightly to the blade.

Rage and hatred boiled beneath my touch.

The heat of that hatred seared my soul. I bore that, though it was a fiercer heat than any forge's. I pushed my fingertips harder against the blade and let myself sink into that cauldron of hate. Blinking through the mists in my mind to see the shape of the knife's soul, I muttered, "This is a young blade, green."

Udeko whispered, "It can't be! The Knife is three hundred years old! And this is the same; I have seen it!"

"Others besides you must have seen it. Wait —." The false knife's soul was trying to elude me, hiding behind great stinking clouds of smoke. I followed it, catching glimpses of hatred and scorn and pride. The angry soul of the knife's maker must have sunk into the blade at its forging.

I said — thickly, for the evil weighed heavily on me, "This was made by a master smith, sometime in the last fortnight."

"*Why?*"

Yes, why? I peered through stinking, blinding clouds and saw the colors and twisted shapes of deceit. "It was made — to replace the true Knife — tonight." The realization made me feel sick. Someone had made this foul thing to touch my sister's son in the most vulnerable moment of his life. I wanted to fling the false knife far from me, but I dared not. Instead, I tracked its soul.

Through the heat-colored mists in my mind, I heard Udeko say urgently, "But we must have the true Knife! It is the law, no other knife can make a man of a King's heir! Obada will remain a child forever, unable to rule...." His voice trailed away; he whispered, as if to himself, "Is that their plan? No! They put this knife in its place! They *meant* us to use *this* knife!"

I was squinting into the clouds that filled my mind, following close on the reeking track of the thing, but Udeko's words pulled me back into the Hall. The sudden shift made me dizzy. I said, "They must have known that I would sense the knife is false!"

Udeko made a sound of disgust. "They thought you would say nothing! You don't see? The traitors believed you would do anything to have your nephew the true, reigning King of Daloro!"

"You are saying the traitors were *Nkai*!"

"I am not saying that." Udeko's voice was as bitter as kola nuts. "You don't think like a courtier, smith-lord. The change was made by Daloro men, of course. Think! The true Knife was forged in a smithy consecrated for that purpose alone. The smithy was built within the priests' enclosure, next to the sacred House of the Word! Everything was done to ensure that no base thought, no evil intent should touch the Knife that makes a king a man! The priests and royal women prayed thoughout the forging; even the smiths were chosen for their purity of heart as much as their skill. Do you see? Can you say that *this* knife was forged so?"

This knife was forged in hatred and anger, and tempered in malice. I said, "The thing was made to poison Obada's manhood — to poison his rule —"

"So that the first Nkai king of Daloro should be so evil that all Daloro would rise up against him —"

"— and against Nkai," I finished bitterly. I could think like a courtier well enough for that. "Nkai would be punished for his tyranny!"

"Yes."

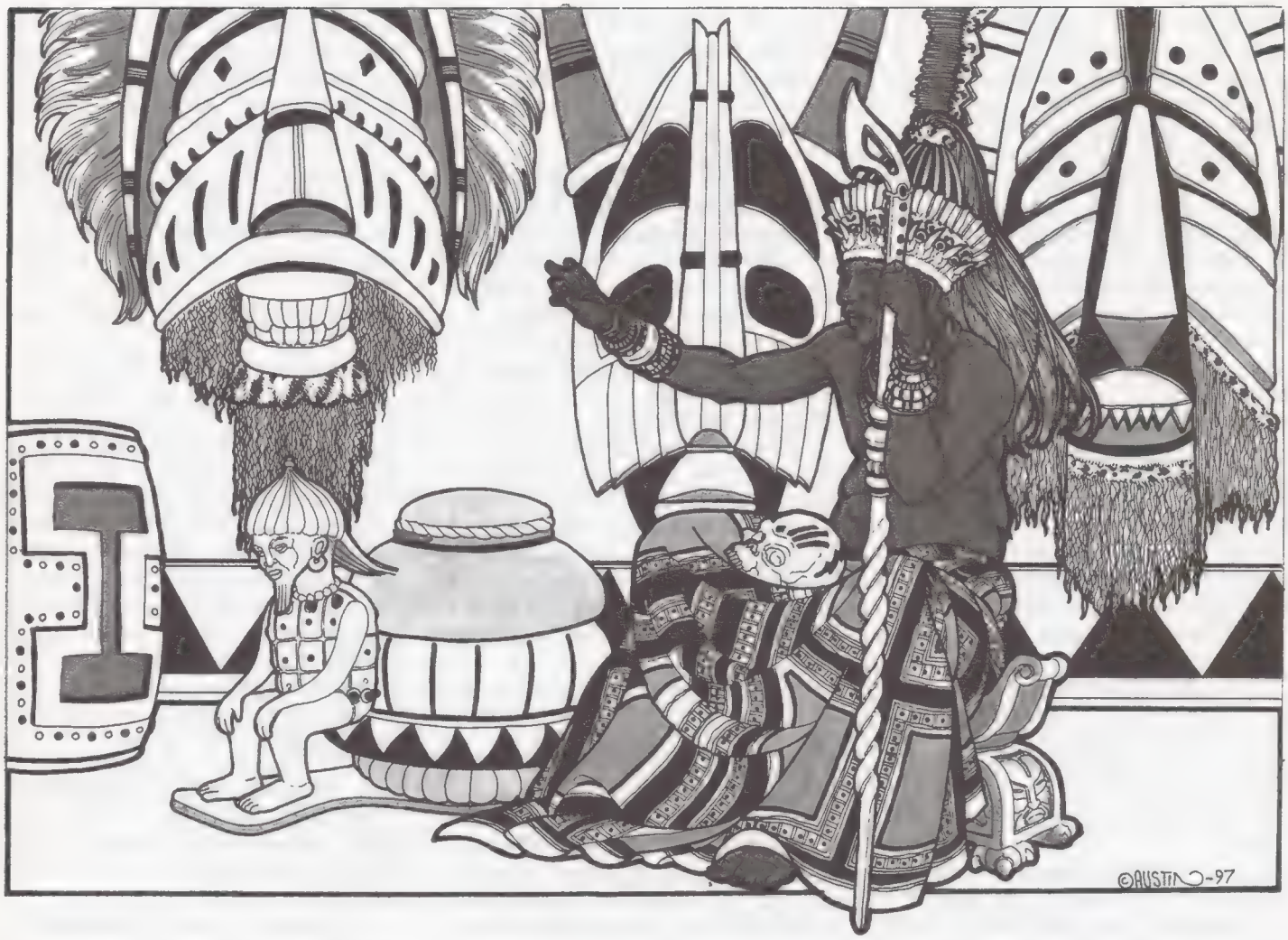
We both fell silent. I have never felt such rage. I wanted nothing of Daloro, but the kingship was Obada's right. No man was going to rob my sister's son!

Udeko said in a soft, dangerous voice, "No man is going to rob my brother's son of manhood and his rights."

I drew a breath, belly-deep. "Yes." I splayed my hand flat on the knife. The full fury of the weapon's rage engulfed me. I seized the fury and bent it in my hands like glowing iron.

Now I could see nothing but the pulsing yellow track of the false knife's soul. I would follow it to its source, but I needed help; I was trance-blind. Shaking, I tightened my grip on the knife's hilt, rose, held out my left hand. "I need someone to guide me. I can't see."

After a moment, powerful fingers gripped my forearm. In that soft, dan-



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gerous voice, Udeko said, "I will guide you."

The royal blacksmith denied everything. "It is the true Knife! The Nkai deceives you!"

I half-expected Udeko to believe him. My sight had returned, once we arrived in the smithy and I laid down the false knife, and now I watched Udeko and waited for him to turn on me.

The Regent said softly, "No Nkai betrays his sister's son, his true son. Who ordered you to make that knife?"

"He lies! The Nkai smiths are witch-smiths —"

"Answer me." Udeko began to circle the man as, earlier, the royal leopard had circled me.

The smith muttered again, "He lies," but his gaze shifted fearfully as Udeko moved behind him. For the first time, I realized that Udeko's Regency could not have been easy. The court must be filled with men who thought as the blacksmith did.

Udeko moved again, stopped. "My claw." He held out his hand, his gaze never shifting from the man in front of him. One of the young guards stepped forward and laid a leather glove across the Regent's palm. Instead of fingers, the glove had long, curved copper talons.

Udeko's gold-circled eyes stayed fixed on the prisoner as he slowly drew on the strange glove.

My vision blurred. In the smithy's dim light, Udeko suddenly loomed up like a great golden bird with terrible eyes, a bird with a voice as soft as a snake's slither. "Who asked you to make this thing?"

The smith shook; he did not answer, only stared helplessly at the copper-clawed glove.

The bird whispered — and yet, who could not hear? — "I am the Regent of Daloro, I am the King's mouth and will! Answer!" He beat his wings, seemed to rise up over the cowering man. Copper claws brushed the smith's cheek, *and I felt the touch.* I flinched in shock as the other smith screamed.

A smith walks in two worlds.

His work is *change*, and change releases great spiritual energies. Certain spirits crave those energies, and they do not care if the *change* is from iron to steel or from boy to man; for them, the meat is the same. They will feed, if the smith cannot prevent them, and where they feed, the metal is flawed, and the boy — well, the boy's parents will not pay for what is left.

So the smith must be ever alert to such presence, and to that end, he pares the hide off his soul and walks naked to the touch and breath of spirit winds, a touch most men cannot bear.

Even some smiths can't bear it.

The copper claw touched the traitor again. I felt the cold, poisonous spirit-breath and shrank from it as my brother-smith screamed. I backed a few steps hastily. A smith does not need to prove he is a hero.

"*Speak*," the bird whispered.

The traitor whimpered.

The claw rose again.

I shoved two guards out of my way and fled. Outside, I dropped to my knees and vomited all the heavy, unfamiliar Daloro food I had eaten that day.

I muttered, "Speak, you fool!"

Silence, then. Stillness.

Presently Udeko came out of the smithy. He was not wearing the glove. He stopped. His eyes in their gold-painted circles narrowed to slits. He said, "It is not poison; my younger brother has tested your food. What is it?"

I stared up at him. It was true that the young prince who personally delivered my meals always sampled each dish and drink before offering them to me. I had supposed it was some complicated Daloro insult.

I said curtly, "I'm well." I stood up. "What did the smith tell you?"

One of the young guards whispered urgently to Udeko. The boy kept glancing at me, and I thought I knew what he was saying: *Now that we have the truth, we do not need the Nkai smith. This is a Daloro matter*!

Udeko looked as if he agreed, so I asked, "Did the smith tell you who ordered the false knife?" *And who has the real one*?

"Yes." He said no more.

"Then I suggest you bring the true Knife to me — if it is unharmed."

The guards gasped.

Udeko said sharply, "No one would harm the Knife!"

I spoke to him as to a very young boy new to the smithy. "Someone with malice in his heart took the true Knife from its Bed, either the smith or the one who ordered the making of the false knife. That one held the true Knife with hatred in his heart. The soul of a great weapon is as sensitive as wax." *As sensitive as a smith to the spirits' touch.* I realized that I was angry because Udeko had tortured the other man through his smith's nakedness. "Knife and knife-maker," I said, "are not so very different."

Udeko said slowly, "You are saying that the hatred these men feel for Nkai may have been impressed into the Knife."

"Yes. Especially if the other man is also a man of spiritual powers."

One of the guards gulped aloud.

Udeko said, "Yes, he has some powers." His voice was as dry as bitter ashes. "Come with me."

He did not tell me where we were going. I refused to ask. We went in silence along narrow, winding paths, unlike the wide public roads of the royal enclosure. I did ask, "What are these ways we are taking?"

"Couriers' ways."

I understood. In affairs of state, one does not always want a procession.

We came to a high, plastered wall painted with Daloro magical symbols. I did not know their meaning, but I felt the signs' power on my skin, like the warm breath of the palace leopards.

Udeko and the guards did not seem to notice. Udeko murmured, "My claw," and one of the youths placed the glove on the Regent's palm.

Udeko drew on the clawed glove. Gently, he stroked the copper claw across the wall. Where there had seemed to be only plaster, now we saw a wooden door carved with what were clearly religious images. What I did not see was any way to open the door, but Udeko stroked the claw sideways over the carved images. We heard a bolt shift inside the compound, and the door gently swung open. The Regent is the mouth and will of the King, who is Daloro itself. No door is closed to the King.

As soon as we stepped inside the enclosure, I knew where we must be. Some things are not so different, after all.

Udeko led us swiftly to the heart of the priests' compound. No one challenged us, for the priests were all indoors today; we could hear them chanting prayers for the King. We kept close to the walls of the small chapels and shrines, careful to tread on the soft earth there, avoiding the wide paths strewn with broken white seashells that would have alerted the priests to our presence.

We stopped at a round building in the center of the enclosure. Even I had heard of this place: the House of the Word, the final resting-place for the most sacred relics of Daloro.

The House was round, built of red stone and black wood, everywhere incised with signs of power. Indeed, power danced in blinding brilliance around the doorframes and shuttered windows. I squinted against that brilliance, then drew my arm across my eyes. The guards looked at me curiously. Perhaps they thought I was weeping.

Udeko softly clawed the door.

The door spat a sheet of white fire that flung us all to the ground. I landed underneath the guards. Shoving them aside, I got to my feet. Udeko was already standing. I snapped, "Why don't you just knock?"

The gold-caged eyes shot me a furious glance; then the prince knocked, sharply.

The door swung open at once — mockingly, it seemed to me. Udeko regarded the door sourly, handed the claw to a guard, and stepped inside. I followed him quickly; who knew what he would find in that House?

Only a man, however. However: a thin old man, in robes of patterned indigo, with a single bracelet of copper wire twisted around each narrow wrist. His sparse hair was grey, his handsome face deeply seamed with age. He sat upon a little stool in the center of the round House, with his long, thin hands lying on his lap. The tools of his power screamed silently around him: the altars, the carved chests, the ancient masks upon the walls.

And the old man sat among these things like any old beggar by the road, his head a little bowed, his hands lying palms-up in his lap like little dead birds, *I am too humble even to stretch out my hands for charity, lay what you will on my lap*.

I feared him.

The high priest spoke in a cracked, old man's voice, gently complaining: "Prince, we see you too seldom."

Udeko swallowed. It did not comfort me to know that he was frightened, too. Perhaps he had never known this man in enmity before.

The high priest went on, gently chiding: "And you have brought the Nkai into holy ground."

"Yes." Udeko sounded unsure of himself. "I —."

I felt it, then: the high priest's power working in that room of power. No wonder the old man sat with head bowed, hands nearly limp on his lap. He was using all his strength to draw power from his surroundings, to bend the Regent to his will.

The old man was as strong as an elephant.

And I stood in the House of the Word, among the carved chests filled with royal relics, and especially the jawbones of departed kings: the jawbones, because a king's words are the king himself. The high priest knew the bones. Perhaps he caressed the old yellow jawbones daily, calling them by their names. The dead love to hear their names. They would trust the high priest, and they would lend him their strength.

The old man murmured, "The Nkai

has no place among your fathers, Prince. Let him wait outside while you talk to me."

The strength of an elephant.

Udeko turned his head first one way, then the other. He did not call for the claw; he must have known it would not work here. He looked at me. He looked confused, as if he did not know why I was there. In another moment, he would order me out.

I said, "Say *nothing*!"

He had opened his mouth; he gasped and nodded and did what must have been a strange thing for the Regent of Daloro: he set all his will to say nothing at all, lest the priest twist his tongue against him.

I began to commit sacrilege. There was nothing else I could do, but I heard the guards gasp as I opened the first chest.

Something like a leopard but colder than death leaped on my soul's back and clawed me.

I set my mind to endure that while I dug into a pile of yellow bones. I reminded myself that whatever power the high priest diverted to me weakened his hold on Udeko. It was Udeko's living jawbone that I feared at that moment.

The priest hissed, "Guards! The Nkai desecrates Daloro! *Seize him*!"

I looked over my shoulder. The young guards looked frightened. One started forward; two others grabbed him. They all looked at Udeko, who stood rigid, his lips crimped like cowry shells, his head turning one way, then the other, as if the strain of resisting grew intolerable.

Dig fast, I thought.

Where had the high priest hidden the Knife? He had not expected me to betray his betrayal. He had not believed that he would need to hide the Knife well. He would surely keep it close to him —

Again the soul-beast leaped on me, its claws raking with a terrible coldness, turning the blood thick and slow in the veins of my soul. I wanted to lie down, I wanted to sleep — but this priest meant to cheat my sister's son and destroy him. I lifted the lid off another chest and dug into the heaped-up yellow skulls. The Knife was not there.

The guards were whispering among themselves, quarreling; at any moment, they would split into factions, and one faction would obey the high priest's command to seize me.

Then Udeko made a sound, quickly stifled. I looked up. Sweat poured down the Regent's face, streaking the gold circles around his eyes. The muscles of his throat bulged with unspoken words.

The high priest hissed softly. "You will die, Nkai witch-smith," he promised, and spared from his domination of the Regent a blast of hatred for me.

A blast of fire.

I leaped toward it, that yellow rage; my soul threw its arms around the fire — and as I did, I recognized the touch of the false knife's soul.

Of course, the high priest had presided at the making of that thing. *Of course* he had breathed his breath on it, this man who knew all about breath and words.

But now he had made a mistake. He had given me fire.

Perhaps he was accustomed to the lesser smiths of Daloro. Perhaps he

Artwork by Alicia Austin

supposed that all smiths are alike.

He was not accustomed to a smith-lord of Nkai.

I held the flames, hot and yellow, raging, in my hands. *Hush, you fools! I am your master! Fire's master*! The flames writhed. I twisted them into bows, plaited them like ornate window gratings, then twisted them straight again. The flames trembled and waited. I whispered to them, *You are my tools; I command you. Go back to the one who sent you and embrace him — now*!

I let them go. Screaming, the flames ran back to their source and engulfed him.

I heard the high priest shriek as the flames, no longer in his control, surrounded his soul, danced over his soul's hands, dove into his spirit's heart. He screamed like any old man trapped in his burning house. He screamed for help.

I waited, staring into the yellow-white flames as they leaped around him, imprisoning and tormenting him. I breathed two words for the flames to hear: *Hotter. Tighter.*

The fire turned white and wrapped itself tighter around the priest's soul. He shrieked, and then I saw him fumble at something that the flames were melting from his soul's heart.

I shouted, *Hotter*!

The flames went blue-white, and the high priest cried out as his soul's heart melted and the secret fell to the floor. I reached through the fire and snatched it up, a little box made of spirit-bone for keeping secrets; I opened it and shook out the secret, a black shadowy thing, and then something hit my earthly jaw so hard that I saw stars and after that, nothing at all.

Someone slapped me awake. I thought it was the high priest until I opened my eyes and saw Udeko leaning over me.

I said, "What?" I was lying on the floor, stupid from the blow that had felled me.

Udeko slapped me again. "*Where is the Knife*?"

I started to hit *him*, then remembered who he was. I pulled myself up into a sitting position and looked around. Two of the guards held a third, who struggled fiercely in their arms; I thought the struggler must be the one who had hit me.

The other three guards surrounded the high priest, who sat slumped on his stool.

Udeko repeated, "Where is —?"

I pointed at the high priest.

"He is wearing it?"

"The stool." I rubbed my own jawbone. It hurt.

Udeko rose. "Lift him off the stool." His voice was as cold as the fire had been hot. The guards exchanged glances, then gingerly lifted the old man from his stool. The high priest looked bitter, broken. The youngest guard turned the stool over and held it up to show us: the Knife, lashed to the underside of the seat.

Udeko turned to me. "Is it the true Knife?"

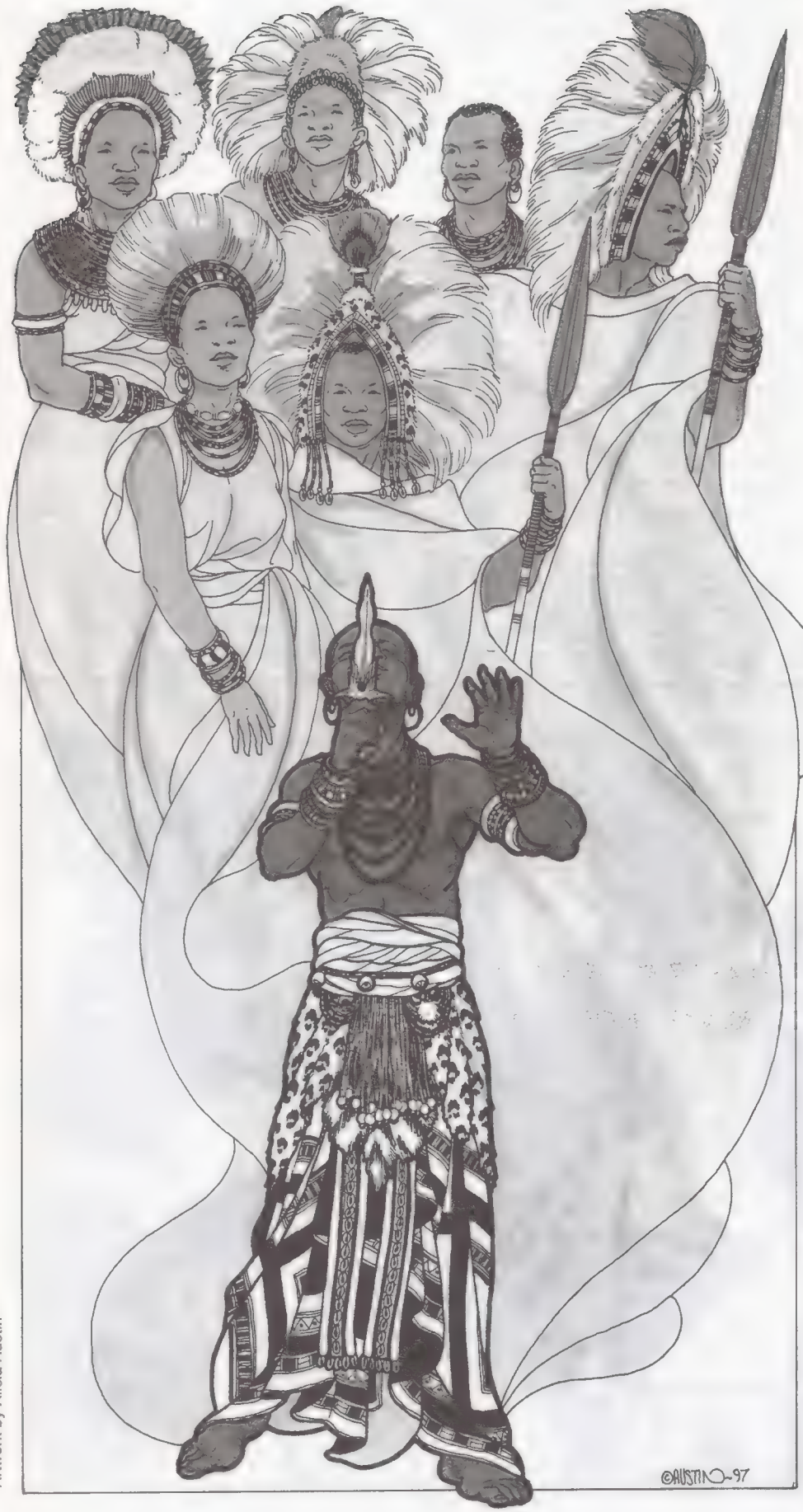
"Oh, yes." I got to my feet and went to look, but I had seen the shadowy secret when I opened the box of bone. This was the Knife.

Udeko asked harshly, "*Is it damaged*?"

"I will have to touch it."

He gestured impatiently: *do so*!

The Knife was bound to the stool



Artwork by Alicia Austin

with brass and copper wires. I used the point of my own knife to pry the true Knife free. I was careful of the copper wires. I had had enough of magical attacks for one day. When the Knife was held in place by only one wire, I stopped to think.

I was certain that the high priest had touched the Knife. But had he held it with reverence and hope for Obada's kingship, or with hatred of all things Nkai? I thought I knew the answer. So, then: had his touch infected the Knife, this only knife that could free a child-king from his childhood?

There was no way to know except by examining the Knife. I reached for it — and stopped again.

Udeko growled, "*What?*"

Slowly, I withdrew my hand.

I must not touch the Knife.

I was as full of rage and old, low-burning hatred as the high priest.

I started to tremble.

How had I failed to think of *that*, when I first went to take the false knife from its Bed? Arrogantly, I had only thought about controlling wildness in the Knife. I had never thought that the harm might come from me.

A knife is a tool, a knife is a weapon, depending upon who wields it — and why.

Even if the Knife was undamaged by the high priest, could I master my own hatred of Daloro, so that I did not poison the Knife, myself?

Udeko asked again, quietly now, "What is it?"

I told him.

The gathering in the great Hall at dusk was nothing like the festival-day I had feared, when Udeko told me that women would be present. The high lords of Daloro and the proud young Daloro-Nkai courtiers and the senior women of the King's household stood in reverent silence as Obada entered the hall with Udeko on his left and my sister at his right.

The young King wore the robes of a royal child of Daloro. I felt a curious pride as he walked with a firm step to the manhood bed and laid himself upon it.

There was a startled murmur in the Hall when a lesser priest came forward to lead the assembly in prayer. The high priest should have officiated, of course. But Udeko's calm acceptance reassured them. He had decided not to reveal the high priest's treachery until

tomorrow.

The prayers ended, and the people looked at me.

Those who were not people watched me, too.

They were waiting and hungry: the wild spirits, jealous ones; and old, dead Daloro royalty whose names had been forgotten and who now envied the living. They waited, drawn by the sweet, succulent scent of *change* to the manhood bed.

The young guard who had found the Knife wired to the stool stood on the other side of the bed, guarding the boy King's body. Udeko had explained why the youngsters dithered helplessly when ordered to arrest me: five of them were half-Nkai. Udeko's gold-circled eyes had gleamed when he told me that the one who finally obeyed the high priest's command — the one with a fist like a blacksmith — was the only pure Nkai. I did not find it nearly as amusing as the Regent did, but I had other things on my mind, and on my soul.

Earlier, in the House of the Word, we had wrapped the recovered Knife in silk, taking care not to touch it with our hands. I had not touched it yet. The Knife waited in its carved Bed on the ebony stand.

I had spent the rest of the day in prayer, trying to bring down the fortress of hatred I had raised in my own mind for twenty years.

But it was not so easy. Even now, as I stood in the Hall of the King, part of my mind whispered: *You can destroy Daloro with a stroke*!

No, I whispered back.

The young guard was looking anxious because I had made no move to pick up the Knife. The young like things to proceed in an orderly way. I nodded to show that I was perfectly in control of everything.

Destroy Daloro!

No.

There is no point in arguing with evil; arguing just wears you out.

With my left hand, I parted the young King's robes. Obada's lashes fluttered once as he was so exposed; otherwise, his face remained serene, a beneficent ancestor mask.

Destroy—

No! This is my sister's son of Daloro!

Yes.

First, unclench the fist. Then unclench the heart's fist.

My sister's son watched me calmly, trusting me as he had trusted his other uncle to bring him safely to this day.

Perhaps it was that trust that finally toppled the fortress in my soul. This boy *was* Daloro. How could I hate my sister's son, who trusted me?

So simple, at last. I smiled at him. He smiled back, his face bright with affection though he hardly knew me.

I said softly, as we say to all the boys: "So. Will you give to childhood what belongs to a child?"

"Yes, uncle. I will be a man."

The Daloro Knife waited on its silk Bed.

It would find no enemy in me.

I picked it up.

And smiled. The moment my fingers embraced the hilt, I seemed to stand in a green place of rivers and flourishing rice, a place of great halls, where children played and the old sat in honor on their fine stools, while the young and strong went about the business of building, making. I saw Obada's father, newly made a man, his eyes shining with dreams. He looked very much like my nephew.

All was well with the Knife.

I blew out a soft sigh of relief — and in that moment, one of the beautiful young men in the Knife's spirit-land whirled around and spat at me: *Witch-smith*!

The high priest's hatred was alive in the Knife, after all.

My enemy's touch. *Daloro…*

No. *No.*

Daloro lay before me, his father's eyes trusting me.

I said to the spirit-youth, *You are a part of Daloro, and Daloro is my sister's son. No man fights his sister's son.*

His perfect features twisted with scorn. *Farmer*! he spat. *Blacksmith! Coward*!

I could strike him dead with one blow from my hammer — but he belonged to Daloro, and shall a man steal from his sister's son? I reminded him, *You are a drop of blood in the King's body. Shall I pour out the blood of the King*?

Someone came to stand beside me, another of the handsome young men of the Knife. He touched my arm, lightly, and I felt his enormous age: he was some ancient Daloro king or prince. He spoke gently to the newest soul of that land, the high priest's poisoned son: *Child, do not speak so to your brother.*

The very young man cried, *He is Nkai*!

The old young man said: *The King's blood is in his veins.*

Others came to crowd around us, young men and women, old people, majestic royal women, gently chiding the newcomer as they would a misbehaving child. Born of love and hopes for righteousness, they caressed his face with touches soft as butter; their words to him unfolded like flowers. *We are all bound by blood. When blood fights blood, the fever rages in the King's body.*

Like gentle smiths, they hammered him with love, heated him with truth, melted the rigid impurities from him until he was red and soft on the anvil of their affection. And then they turned to me, waiting.

I said, *I, too, am blood in the King's body. And — so is Nkai.*

The very young man looked thoughtful, then he said, *And who are those others, surrounding the King*?

The wild spirits, the eager, the forgotten dead, watching —. I said, *Those are the King's true enemies.* I spoke to all the people of the Knife: *I need you, now. Watch over the King.*

We will come with you.

Then I was back in the Hall of the Kings, watched by the seen and those that only I could see.

Everyone was waiting.

In Daloro, I have learned, they use three cuts. That is probably just as well, since their priests are not smiths. In Nkai, *the manhood stroke* is not just an expression.

Ready, I said silently to the Knife.

We are watching, they promised.

I grasped Obada with my left hand.

The wild spirits hummed.

In all of a boy's life, there is no more vulnerable moment than this: a botched cutting exposes his soul to every hostile spirit for miles. The boy can go mad from it, and the spirits will feast on his soul like buzzards.

In my mind I rehearsed the stroke, only once, because after that you become nervous.

When you have rehearsed, you release your mind and let your hands and soul do the job.

The hungry spirits were hissing in their excitement, crowding so close they elbowed each other.

Help me. I opened my soul wide to the Daloro Knife, and the people joined me.

We cut.

Something like a buzzard's wing slashed at my cheek as a spirit dove toward the King. I shouted a word of forbidding; the word echoed with the voices of all the people of the Knife.

Artwork by Alicia Austin

The spirit withered in the air, falling like ashes before it ever touched the King.

The other spirits scrambled back.

The blade of the Knife shone with a pulsing light.

Carefully, with the tip of the blade, I drew the sign of the crossroads on Obada's belly. I placed the Knife reverently on the horizontal of the crossroads, and then, with both hands, I stripped away the King's childhood.

The royal women screamed in unison. Their high-pitched triumphant shriek sent the already half-cowed spirits flying off in all directions. I summoned them back, sharply; held them for a moment to let them feel my strength, and then sent them away from the palace and out of the city in an easterly direction, so that they would encounter as few humans as possible. It would have been much safer in a forest, as we do it in Nkai.

When the last spirit departed, so did my strength. The royal women were still shrieking; only seconds had passed. Drenched in sweat, I picked up the Knife and stepped back from the bed.

The old women, the King's physicians, swarmed around him with herbs and cloths. The young priest came forward to take possession of the foreskin.

I wiped the Knife with a fresh piece of fine east country silk; it deserved no less. The Knife's people sang until I laid the Knife gently on its Bed.

"He did not cry out." Udeko was at my shoulder, relieved and approving.

Was it a slur on the King's Nkai blood? "Of course not!"

"When it was my turn," Udeko said dryly, "I screamed like a chicken, Obada's father had to sit on my chest, and my little brother sat on my legs."

I could think of nothing to say to that.

The old women finished their work, then twelve young men came to strip the King of his boy's clothing and dress him in the brilliant robes of a man. They helped him to his feet. He winced; I flinched in sympathy.

Udeko murmured, "The herbs deaden the pain. He's nearly numb from the waist down."

"Ah."

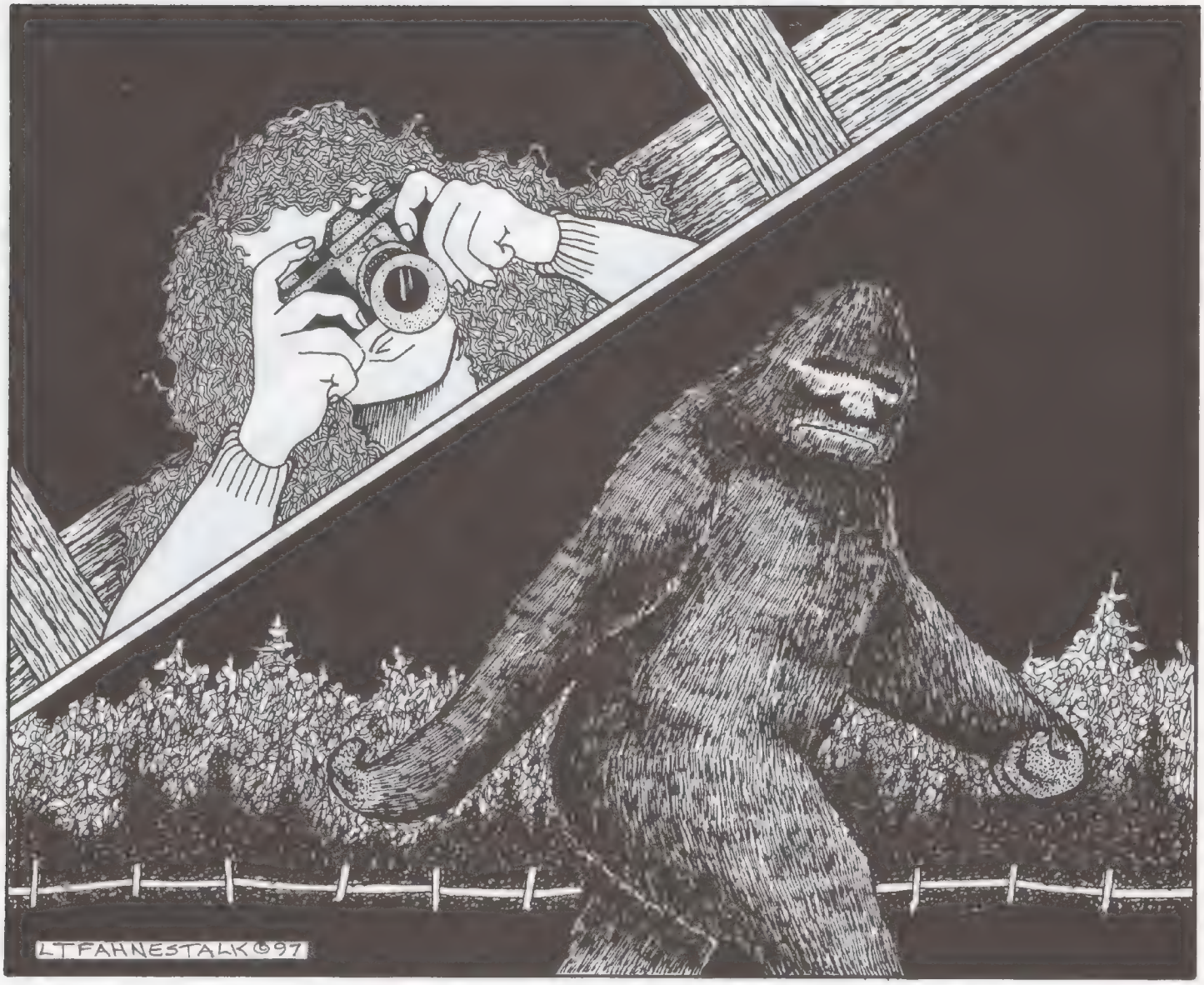
The King beckoned us. We went to him. Obada first thanked the former Regent for all his care when he was a child; then he thanked me for leading him across the threshold of manhood. Then, smiling his father's smile, he swiftly joined our hands. I was further startled when Udeko firmly clasped my hand; I could do no less in return.

I suspect our nephew will make an excellent King.

❄

Mary C. Aldridge lives in Cambridge, MA. Her story, "The Adinkra Cloth", previously published in *MZBFM*, was a Nebula nominee; another story, "The Work Leader", won a Massachusetts Artists Foundation Fiction Fellowship. She has written one non-fantasy children's book (**THE MAN FROM LONDON**), as yet unpublished, and is working on two fantasy novels.

Alicia Austin's work is well-known and loved by science fiction and fantasy fans. She and her business partner, Jinx Beers, run Fantasies Unlimited, a studio which publishes Alicia's cards, limited-edition prints, and other artwork.



A Certain Talent

by Dorothy J. Heydt

Maggie tightened her grip on the steering wheel, as the rough road bucked and shimmied under her, and reminded herself for the dozenth time that she was supposed to be on the wrong side of the road. Somewhere off to the right there was the old pine tree that did duty as a signpost, and if she missed that (the old man in the general store had assured her) she'd get so lost that even God couldn't find her.

But she didn't miss it: it pointed with its one living branch into a tangle of weeds that opened into a narrow lane paved only with fallen pine needles. At its end the spiny-leafed oaks opened into a little valley.

There was a cottage there, made of logs and no bigger than a shepherd's hut, and a garden whose neat drills of vegetables ran almost down to the burn that threaded its way through the valley on its way to the Eel River. And there, standing in the garden, was a man dressed all in black —

Maggie caught her breath. He wasn't dressed at all; that was him. Not black like an African, unless it was an African gorilla; black as a raven, and shaggy. Maggie groped one-handed over the passenger seat for her camera.

But as she raised it, fumbling for the shutter release, the creature raised its head and saw her, and turned and ran. All she would have was a rear view of something dark in full flight: and blurred too no doubt.

Still, it meant she was in the right place.

She pulled up and parked the car, rather at an angle, in front of the cottage. It was old; the logs it was made of

Artwork by Lynne Fahnestalk

had had time to shed all their bark and take on moss instead. But the door was newer, only fifty years old maybe, and had a window in its top. Maggie knocked, and tried to peer inside. The window was fifty years old too, and let the light through reluctantly; but she could see someone moving inside.

She smiled and waved; she must be rather hard to see as well; but surely with her red hair and white face she couldn't be mistaken for the fellow in the garden.

The door opened a crack, then a little wider. The woman inside was a wee thing, only about five feet high, with long brown hair and pretty, frightened grey eyes. "Miss Barbara Tolliver?" Maggie said. "I'm Margaret Ogilvy, from Inverness, Scotland. I did write — but the man at the general store said you hadn't been in to pick up your mail in a while — so I don't know if you've been expecting me."

"Expecting — you," Miss Tolliver said, as if the words were French that she had learned in the fourth form and not used since. Then she glanced upwards, over Maggie's shoulder, and said rapidly, "Come in, please, and let's shut the door."

Maggie did so. Miss Tolliver was holding onto the back of a kitchen chair, and its feet were beginning to chatter against the floor. "You sit down," Maggie told her. "I'm going to make some tea. That fellow won't be back soon."

"What fellow?"

So it was going to be like that? Maggie didn't try to answer. She waved Miss Tolliver to her seat, and the camera swinging from her wrist nearly hit her in her own nose. She took it off and set it on the table.

The pump in the sink worked, and she filled the kettle with water; lifted the stovelid and set the kettle over the heat. There was firewood stacked neatly beside the stove, and she fed the fire and closed the firebox door before it could spit cinders into the room. "I'm impressed," Miss Tolliver said. "It took me months to figure out that stove."

"Oh, I learned on my old grannie's, back home," Maggie said. "She was the caretaker at Urquhart Castle. That's how I got into the business, you see."

Then she drew up the other chair and sat down opposite Miss Tolliver.

"Now I'm going to come directly to the point if I may, for I don't want to waste your time. It's come to our attention that you have a certain talent."

Miss Tolliver looked at her hands.

"I've been searching for you over the past two years, ever since that story about the alligators hit the news. But by the time I got to New York, you were gone and so were the alligators."

The kettle started to sing, and Maggie spooned tea into the warmed teapot and poured in the water. Mugs; sugar; powdered milk. She brought them all to the table.

"Why did you leave New York? The alligators were relatively harmless, weren't they?"

"So long as you stayed away from the sewers. It wasn't them; it was the things that came out of Central Park. There were too many people there to get hurt; that's why I went to the small towns."

"Where there weren't any creatures?"

"I wish it were that easy." Miss Tolliver reached out and put her hands

Artwork by Lynne Fahnestalk

on either side of the teapot, as if she were cold. "There are creatures everywhere. Every place has its own. Most of them sleep most of the time. But where I go, they wake up. So you've heard of the Wendigo on the shore of Lake Winnipeg, and the alligators in the New York sewers, and the things that walk in Central Park — though even the New Yorkers think they're only junkies in search of drug money, till it's too late. You've never heard of the little red man of Crowheart, Wyoming, have you; or the eagle women of Fort Grant, Arizona, or the wicker walkers of Shallow Creek, Kansas. Because once I left, they went back to sleep again before they could get into the papers.

"That's why I came here, to Bigfoot country. If I went to, to Twodot, Montana, or Muleshoe, Texas, no telling what I'd waken there. Here, I know it's Bigfoot country, and the Bigfoot is supposed to be mild, and timid, and harmless. So I came here. It was a good idea, while it lasted."

The tea had steeped long enough; Maggie poured it out and added milk and a lot of sugar to the mugs. "Drink that; you need it. So he didn't turn out as timid as he was painted?"

Barbara Tolliver sipped at her tea. "He was at first. I guess it comes under the heading of 'familiarity breeds contempt.' It's like the squirrels in parks where people feed them; they don't stop being wild, they don't like you, but they know you've got food and it makes them bold. After the first couple of months, I'd see him standing on the edge of the forest. Then he'd come and raid my garden at night. Now he comes in the daytime. He tries the door, but he doesn't know how the doorknob works, not yet. Another time he climbed the roof and tried the chimney-pipe, but some hunters driving past took a shot at him; but they missed, and he ran away."

"Missed with their guns, but not with their camera," Maggie corrected. "The photo made the front page of the Sun, and then I knew where to look —" There was a thump at the door, and Maggie looked up and said, "Oh, dear me."

Framed in the misty glass he stood, black and shaggy as a gorilla, with a man's face and wild, wild eyes. Miss Tolliver cried out and hid her face in her arms, moaning something about a curse; but Maggie snatched up her camera from the table and fired it in his face. He gaped and jumped back.

She rose from the table, nearly knocking her chair over, and snatched open the door. The Bigfoot was fast on his feet; she got only three shots of his retreating back before he vanished under the eaves of the forest. She took a few more of his footprints — with her own foot beside them for scale — just for good measure. Mph'm. If Miss Tolliver had realized that a camera was what this walking legend most feared, she might have had an easier time of it.

"Now listen," Maggie said, re-entering the cottage. "I really do need to get to the point. I'm here to offer you a job."

"A job? Doing what, where? If you think there aren't any creatures in, in wherever it was —"

"Inverness, Scotland. Dear lady, I am employed by the Loch Ness District Association for the Promotion of Tourism."

"Oh, my God."

"I don't know if you saw it in the papers a few years back; some well-meaning fool confessed on his deathbed that he'd faked that photo of Nessie he'd taken back in 1934; one of our best. After that, our tourist trade dropped off quite appallingly — and of course, the fewer tourists we have, the fewer sightings; and the fewer sightings, the fewer tourists; it's a downward spiral. But if you will come to Loch Ness and accept a reasonable salary and the tenancy of a very pleasant little cottage near Urquhart Castle, then Nessie will come back. It goes to show, our Heavenly Father does nothing without a reason. Your gift may have been a curse for you up till now, Miss Tolliver, but to us it'll be a blessing."

Miss Tolliver sat, mouth open, while one might have counted ten. Then a long howling sound echoed out of the woods, like a wolf's howl but with words in it. "Right," she said. "Let's go."

She had her bits of things packed into a rucksack in three minutes, and was in the car in four. She sat guard at the window, camera in hand, until they reached the main road, and then curled into a corner of the seat and slept the sleep of deep exhaustion all the way to Ukiah.

She woke as they drove into the airport. "Uh-oh. I don't think this is going to work. It's not safe for me to fly."

"Why not?"

"Any plane I ride on for more than a few hours attracts gremlins. They hang off the wingtips, they cut the control cables — the plane I took to New York nearly crashed. By the time we landed even the pilots could see them."

"Not to worry," Maggie said calmly. "I thought of that one. Look, there's our plane waiting for us."

It was a rounded propeller-plane, bigger than the little private planes all round it but smaller than a commercial jet. "It's an old Dakota, and Pilot Officer Bates, RAF, to fly it for us. It may take several days; but it'll get us there."

"A DC-3," Barbara said softly. The mists of evening swirled around its wingtips, soft as feathers, and for a moment they fancied they could see the bright eye and foolish grin of the Gooney Bird that flies forever.

❄

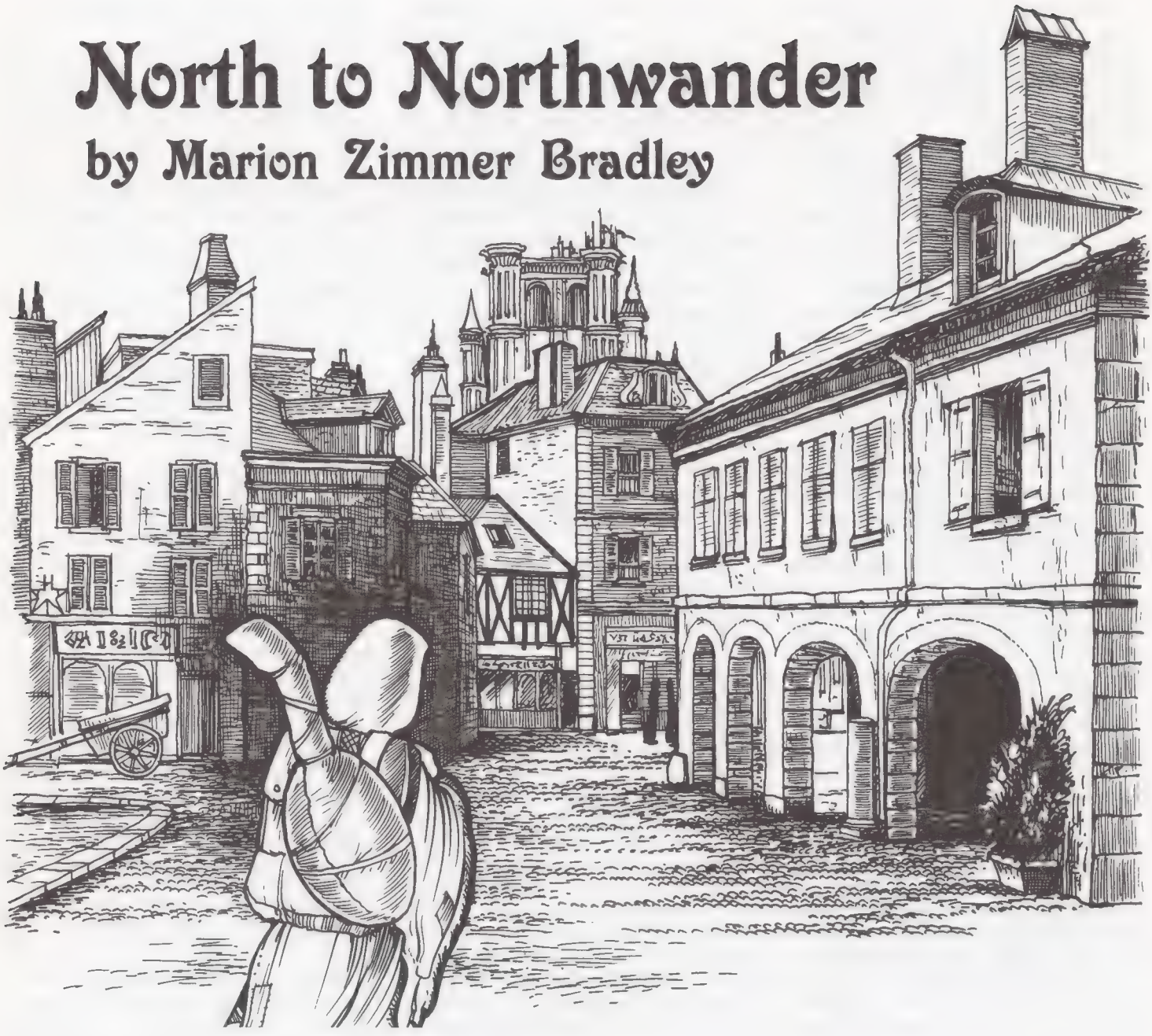
Artwork by Lynne Fahnestalk

Dorothy J. Heydt still has one husband, two (grown) kids, three cats, and she's not sure how many computers because some of them are stored under the fabric collection in the third bedroom. She currently works for two scientists: one studies DNA tied in knots and the other knows several hundred ways of causing cancer in rats. If either of these topics starts creeping into her fiction, you'll be the first to know.

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk has been working as a professional artist for over 15 years. She is a two-time recipient of the Canadian Aurora Award for Artistic Achievement.

North to Northwander

by Marion Zimmer Bradley



It had been several years since the minstrel-magician Lythande had dared to go near Northwander at the height of summer, but this year she felt it should be safe enough to do so. Surely, she thought, the effects of the spell which had made her think it prudent to avoid the place had been nullified by now.

Not quite within reach of her destination, Lythande stopped in a small village, looking around the darkening streets. Not for the first time, she cursed to herself the *geas* which demanded she must forever travel in the guise of a man. Most of the time she simply lived with her fate and did not think about it much; it was simply the price of her magic, like the Blue Star tattooed between her brows, and she thought about it as little; but here in this town there was a cozy cafe filled with women, and hearing the sound of their voices, she felt a vague hunger, like the ache in a long-missing tooth, to join their company as one of them.

But, she asked herself forthrightly: would she sacrifice her magic? For a moment she entertained the idea; then brought herself back to sanity. For what else had she sought and suffered, if not to be free of this vast tedium? The life of a woman had wearied her before her breasts had fully grown. She would not have it again as a gift!

She had entered the cafe as she thought, and now the owner was looking inquiringly at her. She asked for a pound of raisins and two of prunes, with a single pound of dates, and obtained the loan of a mortar and pestle in which she pounded raisins and prunes into a single fragrant mass. Adding a few pitted dates for flavor, she spread them into sheets which dried quickly into leathery squares of a flavorful paste. She rolled each sheet into a tasty mouthful, to be stowed in the pockets of the mage robe and be eaten when she had no leisure for a meal unobserved.

Artwork by Hannah Shapero

Then she asked, "Am I right for the castle?"

One of the swaddled ladies, bearing themselves cozily upright like hens, almost clucked. "Right there. You can't get nowhere else from here, Lord Magician. An' may I ask why you're agoin' there at this season?"

Not pleased — why in heaven's name had she been able to tolerate even the thought of living as a woman? — she said calmly "I am a poor minstrel and magician; I must earn my bread by song or by magic; and often at festival, there are some who seek my arts or those who need my magic for hire."

"A magician for hire," said one of the women, "What an entertaining idea. Tell me, what sort of magic can you do for hire? Just for a f'rinstance, Sir Magician. What kind of magic can I hire you to do?"

Vastly entertained, Lythande prepared to give one of her sales pitches. "Oh, there are many things; once a township hired one of my kind to rid them of an infestation of magical beasts like rats — wuzzles — invisible creatures infesting the grain. And I do a nice business, of course, in lovecharms; in fact one of my greatest businesses is in love charms. Could I work for you a love charm — find you a nice young cavalier, ma'am, madly in love wi'you?"

"Ai!" the woman giggled. "What would my ol' man say to that?"

"I know not, lady, but once I heard somewhere — though I have none — of such a potion that was strictly moral, having no effect whatever on faithful married persons."

The woman giggled again. "Could you make me up one of that kind? Strictly moral so me old husband wouldn't object?'

Good heavens, Lythande thought, *what madness prompted me to bring that up!*

"Oh, come on," giggled the woman, "I don't believe there ever was such a thing."

"Are you doubting my powers, Madame?

Lythande knew she would be better off to say nothing — for she doubted it too — but some compulsion had prompted it — no doubt for its own reasons.

"Well, yes. Yes, I am," the woman replied, still giggling. "I don't believe anyone, however much a magician, can do such a thing. Nor I don't believe they ever could or would, so there! You're just bragging, like all those fellows call themselves magicians an' make up things they can't do."

Lythande told herself furiously that she should simply accept this, humiliating or not. What had prompted her to bring up the subject? And yet, as if compelled, she heard herself say, "Oh, I will take the challenge. But first, let us be clear about this: you wish for a lover who will be besotted with you and yet in no way endanger your marriage or your husband's feeling for you, or your own sense of morality."

"Yes, but it sounds pretty silly when you put it like that, don't it." The woman tittered.

Somehow, Lythande felt compelled by this challenge of her powers. She felt a sense of recklessness — and — perhaps too, at last, an element of caution.

She said calmly, "I will do even as I say," and looked straight at the old woman whose eyes fastened on her with a tardy half-horrified awareness. "But I must first consult my books of magic," she said, thinking that at last this would give them a few sane minutes to reconsider. To reconsider what, she did not know or care.

Within her voluminous magician's robe she found her small condensed book of spells. A peculiarity of this book was that no particular spell was ever within this book until she had

Artwork by Hannah Shapero

formulated a need for it. Now, suspecting that what she wanted did not exist, she searched only at random. What she sought could hardly be a lovecharm; a romantic relationship for a married woman which could endanger neither health nor morals was almost by definition not a genuine love affair. What it was, she did not know; but by the end of this ill-fated experiment she might. This might be why she had agreed to it. Her inability to imagine such an affair might simply lie in the failure of her own imagination. And curiosity was a strong motivating force.

She arranged to sleep in one of the community barns, and before she slept, formulated in her mind all the qualities of the lover she sought. At least, she thought, if it met this standard it could not do her any great harm ... explicitly no damage to her morals or her well-being. At last she drifted into a fitful sleep.

Outside the barn was a strange sound, a weird moaning. As Lythande slowly came up through the veils of sleep, she realized that what at first she had thought the mooing of a cow was the wailing sound of some great beast outside, wailing and moaning what appeared to be — of all things — her name.

"Lythande! Lythande!" and then a most frantic and desperate cry.

"Alas, Lythande my beloved! I can-

Artwork by Hannah Shapero

not live without you."

Lythande drew the mage-robe about her body. What sort of great love had been attracted by her spell? Well, whatever it was, by the very precautions which had fenced it round, it would be incapable of doing her any harm; not to her health nor even to her morals, though she was quite sure that, by ordinary standards, she had no morals. She stepped out of the barn and under a great shadow darkening the early morning sun and closing off almost half the sky.

A creature of cloud? It was so vast that beneath the low-hanging sky she could hardly take it all in. Then it flapped its mighty wings, moaning out its call, blurred by the vibrations so near.

"Lythande! Oh, Lythande, come to me, my beloved! I have reconsidered, and of all I have known I love only you."

Lythande stood looking up at the sky. *Oh no!* she thought. It was the were-dragon Beauty! Beauty was the reason Lythande had been avoiding Northwander.

And Beauty knew her female identity.

"Beauty," she cried out. "Come down here at once. And please stop making that noise!" So this, she thought, was what her spell had brought.

Beauty's great shadow diminished somewhat as the were-dragon climbed down the sky and shrank into her human form, asking meekly, "Don't you like my song, Lythande?"

"I have no desire to criticize your musical talents," Lythande said quickly, "but it is still early in the day. I was experimenting with a spell, but it seems to have pulled you in, and you endanger my very existence, calling attention to me thus."

"Not for the world and everything in it would I cause you even a moment's pain or sorrow, Lythande. But I beg you, do not send me away from you so soon, Lythande. I live only to serve you."

Lythande felt just a little ashamed of herself — and very nervous. She wondered how she could have come to inspire the devotion of this powerful and capricious creature; apparently this spell was curious indeed.

"I think I owe you an apology, Beauty," she said. "Will you come into the inn, and have a drink or a morning bowl of coffee with me, and I will explain. But I am traveling incognito; you must say nothing of my true identity."

"I rather think you are always traveling incognito," said Beauty shrewdly. "But I would never endanger you, Lythande," she added in a soft and sincere voice.

"Come, then," Lythande said gently. "Share my breakfast and I will tell you what a foolish thing I have done." But, she wondered, had it been so foolish after all? She had been lamenting the secret of her womanhood — and this was what she had called to her? Was this not as good or maybe better than many lovers? What was better than a friend; a friend to whom her true identity was known, so that she could feel the freedom of her hidden womanhood. What was love but to have one who knew the truth of you and — spell or no spell — accepted you nonetheless?

Over a breakfast which she shared with Beauty, of bowls of milk and coffee for Beauty, she confided to the were-dragon what she had done and then released her from the spell. Fortunately Beauty chose to be amused, rather than annoyed.

And when Beauty had flown away again, still chuckling; Lythande awaited the woman who had demanded the spell which would never endanger her health nor morals nor the affections of her husband.

"Here it is," said Lythande, holding out her arms. In them, a small spaniel puppy wriggled. "Here is a love which will never endanger the love of your husband, perhaps the truest love of all."

The woman stared down. "A puppy dog," she said. "Now how, I wonder, did you happen to think of that?"

"Lythande smiled. "Because," she said, "If I gave you a dragon, she might step on you."

But, no matter how the woman begged, Lythande would not explain. ❄

Marion Zimmer Bradley edits this magazine. She is perhaps best known for her bestselling novels **MISTS OF AVALON**, **THE FOREST HOUSE**, and **LADY OF AVALON**. She also wrote the Darkover series of sf novels and edits the **SWORD AND SORCERESS** anthology series for DAW.

Hannah M. G. Shapero spends most of her waking hours sitting at red lights on Route 7 in Falls Church, Virginia, where she lives, near Washington, D.C. When she finally gets into the studio she produces fantasy, science fiction, and commercial art. She is trained as an architectural illustrator and does architectural renderings for real estate ads as well as fantasy cities for private collectors.

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Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

KVETCHULA

by Darrell Schweitzer

"Ruth," my grandmother Esther once explained to me, "there's no helping it. You're a born *kvetch*. A *kvetch* is a complainer, a person who complains and complains all the day long and all through the night, because *kvetches*, they don't have peaceful dreams. A *kvetch* can't stop kvetching, no more than they can get rid of the damp when it rains and soaks everybody to the skin. The *kvetch* just *kvetches* about being wet; then she sneezes, and then *kvetches* about sneezing, because a *kvetch kvetches*, plain and simple. The woid is both a noun and a voib, depending on where you put it."

Grandmother Esther said "woid" and "voib" 'cause she's not sophisticated like me, though she did go to school.

So I am a *kvetch*. The world needs its *kvetches*, or else why would God make so many of them? A dirty job, but somebody's got to do it.

I tell you, it keeps me constantly busy.

There's my husband Morris, whom I married out of pity, and that's the truth, because he needed looking after so badly. *Every* moment of the day he keeps me hopping.

"Morris, your spectacles are on top of your head, so stop tearing the place apart," I have to tell him, and "Morris, did you change your shorts?" (and this *in front of people* sometimes, but I've got to remind him), and also "Morris, stop wearing those *awful* ties!"

The ties are the worst part. I don't know where he gets them. It's no use if I throw them out, because he always gets more. I swear they've got a whole department of devils in Hell just working full time to keep my husband supplied with ties, for the sole purpose of trying the patience of Ruth Leibowitz.

And my patience has its limit, to tell you the truth.

The glaring, puke-green silk one, that one I can live with, or the day-glo pink one with the eyeball, even the one with the hula-girl under the palm tree, and I refuse to take seriously the plain white one he wears with a black shirt so he looks like some Mafia don. But his warped idea of class is going to our fancy twenty-year high school reunion banquet showing off a tie with a picnic-table pattern that's got *enormous ants all over it!* With that one, he goes too far. That one I took to the office and fed into the shredder, but it did me no good, he has more of them. Maybe they grow in his closet. I swear he wears them just to torment me, such an ungrateful man.

Then there are the vampires. Morris, he's partial to wolfmen and mummies and Frankensteins like he is still a little boy, but what he really loves are these vampires, especially the young and sexy ones he watches over and over again on our VCR. Every vampire movie ever made, my Morris he's got them all, and he sits all day and watches them when he should be mowing the lawn or changing his shorts or *something*.

Once, just to make a joke, I ask him if he's ever seen *Mein Yiddishe Dracula*, and he doesn't blink, and starts rummaging among his Mount Everest pile of tapes and says, "I think it's in here somewhere, Honey Love."

My Morris, he's totally nuts about vampires and such.

So I'm not surprised — but this is not to say I'm not appalled — when he says, "Honey Love, guess where we're going for vacation. To Transylvania. I've saved up. I've already bought the tickets. So we're going on the Deluxe Vampire Tour." And then he adds, "There's no refunds."

You could hear my jaw drop in Brooklyn. We live nowhere near Brooklyn.

Morris, he's all smiles, like some kid who's got an "A" on his report card or something. He's even gone and bought a new tie for the occasion. It's all black with a glow-in-the-dark bat with motorized wings that really flap. He's particularly proud of that. And the noise it makes. Whir ... flap, flap. Oy!

Kvetch? Maybe you think I should celebrate?

So the summer arrives and off we go to the airport with Morris wearing his stupid tie, which delays us because its tiny motor makes the security machines bleep, and the guards look at Morris like he's a mad bomber with an exploding tie, but finally we get through, and he babbles all the way about Vlad the Impaler, who was not a nice man at all, and *nosferatu*, a word which could never fit into the crossword puzzle I'm doing to occupy myself with and hide my embarrassment.

Then we're in Bucharest and everything gets much worse. Our tour group is forming up, and now there's a whole busload of people just like Morris. They jabber and jabber things like, "Listen to them, the children of the night, such beautiful music they make," but I don't hear no music, and I don't care, it's so awful, *because everyone of them is wearing that same damn tie!*

Now I have to admit those mountains are pretty, the Balkans or Carpets or whatever they are. ("*Carpathians*," Morris whispers in a tone like it's some crime to make a little mistake in geography, even if I did graduate almost thirty years ago and how many of these Romanians know *their* way around *Jersey City*?)

So they've got nice mountains. Almost like the Catskills.

But the tour, it's not so nice. Their buses are always late and you can't find a decent bathroom, and the food is, to talk like Morris for a minute, an unspeakable blasphemy of indescribable horror, which is a pretty accurate description.

So there they are, all these middle-aged Children of the Night — that's the name of the fan club, I finally discover — all of them wearing those awful ties, with only me to take care of them, such other such wives as are dumb enough to come being as whacked-out as their husbands, some of them actually wear-

ing flapping bats in their hair, which is something, I swear to you, you will never see Ruth Leibowitz ever do. We traipse all over these Carpathians, go into this crypt and out of that vault, and we listen while long-winded tour guides lecture us as we stand around one more pile of rocks. The guide keeps going on about how only goodness can stop a vampire, like waving crosses and all, so finally I can't stand it any longer. I ask him a historically challenging question.

"Well, what did you Commies do, wave a hammer and sickle at them?"

You see, I know this guide works for the government and since he's not a kid, I know he's been doing this for years, that makes him a Commie.

And Morris he looks like he's just swallowed a live poodle, and everybody else turns away and groans, with their little plastic bats fluttering like sick birds with no feathers.

The guide, he says in a low, nasty voice, all the time pretending to be polite, "Madame, I assure you, there are ways."

Like the bad guys say in the movies, "Ve haf *vays* to make you talk."

Right now I want him not to talk, but to shut up.

Morris yanks me away and whispers, real mortified like, "What do you think *we* do? Draw a Star of David on the vampire's forehead with a magic marker?"

Which is probably an interesting question, but just then I don't feel much like being interested.

That same night at Castle Bran we're all gathered in the floodlit courtyard for some kind of theatrical number. "Do they really make bran flakes here?" I kid Morris, who has no sense of humor. Then I notice him noticing that *other woman*, the pale and slinky one with the long black dress and awful black fingernails, and he notices me noticing him noticing — here I am looking out for his best interests, as if he could see something in a creature like that — and his expression is downright defiant, like he's been this whole trip. So I decide to give the both of them a piece of my mind, but then *she* notices all this noticing, and our eyes meet, and her look I can't describe. Cold. Empty. Those huge dark eyes of hers look like two subway tunnels that stretch all the way down to nowhere and you know there's never going to be any train coming on those tracks, because they closed the station down before Moses parted the Red Sea. Only the tunnels are somehow evil and sucking me in.

They give me goosebumps, those eyes, so I jerk away and look at something else, and don't say anything to Morris for a while.

About midnight, in our crummy hotel, Morris gets up to go to the bathroom — for God's sake there isn't even a bathroom in the room, it's down the hall, it looks like some 14th-century dungeon maybe! — and he's gone so long that when he comes back, I say half-asleep, "Did you fall in?"

Right then and there he starts making love to me. I say, "Not now, I'm tired," but that doesn't stop him, and *Oh my God!* he hasn't been like that in years, and it's so ridiculous, fat, balding Morris in his glow-in-the-dark bat pajamas all over me, just *exploding* with passion like he's a Don Juan or something, and *Oh!* he's *never* been like this, and I say, "Morris, what's come over you?" and I could almost get to like it, he's such a changed man. Except for the pajamas, I might have thought he was some other man snuck into my bed!

But then I come fully awake, and I say, "Morris! Your hands are so *cold*!" but he doesn't say anything. He just bites me on the neck and I shriek and sit up with Morris hanging onto me like some enormous tick, and switch on the light and see myself in the mirror and there I am all wild-eyed, with *blood* on my neck, but there's no reflection of Morris at all. He and his pajamas have both turned invisible. And, as I watch, I seem to turn invisible too.

Then I wake up in a coffin, but that's

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

not the worst of it, because now I'm in the *real* 14th-century dungeon that's just below the bathroom and it's muddy and my nightgown is ruined, and they've buried me with my curlers half falling out — which would mortify me, if I weren't already dead. Me, such a neatnik, laid out with curlers in my hair!

So now we're vampires, Morris explains, and I think he has made me a vampire too because he can't live without me, even if he is dead. So we wander around the hotel a bit, we jump on one of the bellboys and drink his blood — which doesn't taste *good*, but I've had worse to eat on this tour — and then a clerk comes and taps us on the shoulders and says we have to go down into the dungeon for the Vampire Orientation Course, because they've got a lot of forms to sign and fill out, and we fill them out. The Vampire Welcoming Committee finally gives us new ID's, but you have to stare at the photo crosseyed for a long time do you see anything, like one of those holographic pictures.

Most of the people from the tour are there, and the bellboy, and the guides, and then that slinky woman comes up and tells us what we *have to do*. She thinks she's some important vampire; her name is something weird, Zora or Gavora or something. We have *responsibilities* she tells. Vampires secretly run the world, undead hands hold the levers of power, she says. We are in charge. We've been in charge for a long time. When the Archduke Ferdinand got killed in Sarajevo, she explains, there was one story put out in the newspapers, but *we actually did it*. In fact, Miss Slinko, Zora or whatever the smug bitch's name is, hints she killed him personally.

Now she brings on this whiskery old duffer in a band costume who says he's the Archduke, and he tells how it was, having some trouble being understood what with his whiskers and his long teeth and his accent. I want to ask him if he really is the long-lost missing link between Colonel Sanders and Santa Claus, but I do not.

Miss Slinko continues the lecture. As for the Commies, she explains, nodding to me, they weren't a problem, because Ceauçescu was one of us, and when they showed him dead on television he wasn't just shot, he had a stake through his heart, just outside of the frame of the picture.

So off we go across Europe, me and Morris and the rest of the Vampire Graduating Class of '96, with our coffins loaded on trucks and driven by drunken Gypsies who seem to find the bumpiest roads they can exceed the speed limit over, but when I complain Slinko says they've been in the hauling vampires business almost as long as she's been slinking. ("But you don't look a day over five hundred," I assure her.)

Every night we go out and bite people, it's our job, and if we drain all their blood they become vampires too, otherwise they wake up in the morning with a worse hickie than my cousin Alma's teenage daughter after a date. Then they *really* have something to *kvetch* about.

Me, I still care about the company I keep. Some people I won't let Morris drain entirely because I wouldn't have them sharing the same truck with me, yak-yak-yakking in their coffins. One *yenta* is enough.

Still, Morris is having the time of his life, if I may use that expression. Such an exhibitionist. He even got himself a black cape, a white vest, and a medallion, the whole nine yards, and he likes to go swirling off into the night where I can't look after him. He prefers the showy entrances, oozing into someone's room under the door as a mist, or flapping at their window until the victim lets him in. I'm ashamed to say he's *particularly* fond of looming over ladies in their beds with those glowing eyes of his, making all sorts of funny gestures before he drops down and covers them up with his cape.

But worst part is he still sleeps in those bat pajamas, in his coffin next to

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

mine.

And, just to torment me, he still wears those ties, even if they don't go well with the rest of his outfit. He wears them with his pajamas too. The man is still ungrateful after all I've done for him.

Plus, I've got good reason to envy Miss Slinko with her the sexy shape, because for all I'm a vampire too, this doesn't make me *svelte;* I am stuck through all eternity with a *zaftig* figure no fat farm can save me from now. And I still have to spend hours with my make-up — you just try putting it on when you can't see yourself in a mirror. Then it's work, work, work, sidling up to frumpy tourists, pretending to ask directions as I get out a map and lead them aside, ignoring their saying, "Lady, what good is a map of Bucharest? This is Paris." Or it is Rome or Vienna or London. Before they can figure it out, *chomp*, I get rather attached to them.

You know, most people's blood tastes like weak, badly-curdled borscht. The other vampires agree, but nobody knows how to improve it. When I suggest maybe we should popularize some kind of flavored food-additive for the living, Morris cocks his eyebrow, swirls his cape, and runs off with the Children of the Night to make beautiful music. Actually he can't carry a tune in a bucket.

Work, work. We certainly get around. It is a little-known fact that when certain prominent people die, who are already vampires, or about to be vampires, we already-vampires have to dig them up for the first time, to show them around. Morris and I get drafted onto the Exhumation Detail. We dig up Mitterand, and then Andropov, who got forgotten for a few years because of politics, and we welcome them to the club. Nixon too, and Mrs. Thatcher, even though she isn't dead yet, she just fits in so perfectly.

Still, we mostly make tourists into vampires, me with my very tattered map of Bucharest, all of us bumping around and around in cheap wooden coffins with no conveniences. We have to listen to stale Gypsy jokes more than once, while the trucks break down more often than not. Once in Bulgaria we're all off-loaded and on our way to the trash-compactor before fortunately the sun goes down and I am able to take matters in hand. Afterwards, we spend the whole night scrounging up an additional truckload of coffins for all the Bulgarian officials that needed convincing.

In short, for all that my husband may think this is a fine way for a grown-up dead man to occupy himself, *I* can certainly see room for improvement.

For one thing, Morris doesn't call me Honey Love anymore, and I miss that.

So, when I finally can't stand it anymore, I grab Morris by the scruff of his cape and say, "Look, we're going to *complain* to whoever's in charge here," and when he's horrified and says, "But you *can't*!", I tell him I certainly can. I will speak to the boss. My mind is made up.

"You mean to Count Dracula himself?"

"Is that who the boss is? Then he's getting a piece of my mind."

Oh, he flusters and he flutters and he gnashes those big fangs of his, but Morris was never a match for me when my mind's made up. So, just before dawn, as all the other vampires are going beddy-bye and the sun will come shining up within minutes, Morris and I drag our coffins away from the others, and just in the nick of time hypnotize two Gypsies, who steal a nearby crumbling Volkswagen minibus left over from the '60s — it's got purple flowers all over it, in fading, peeling paint — and load us into it. Off we go, faster than ever, over even bumpier roads than before, all the while thanking God or maybe someone else that the bus doesn't break down and that I don't have to convince too many officials to let us pass.

Deeper and deeper into the wild Carpathians our Gypsies drive us as we slide around inside our splintery coffins, and more than once I have to bang on the lid to yell, "Hey! Slow down! You trying to kill us?" Which is funny, because we are already dead, but the Gypsies can't hear us and go on telling their own tired jokes. When they don't know which way to turn, I have to get out of my coffin and tell them that too, because we vampires have a fine sense of direction, but it is a miracle we ever get anywhere.

Naturally, Morris is having a wonderful time. Each night, we pull off to the side of the road, and while the Gypsies snooze in the trance I put them in, Morris and I go terrorize the countryside. Wolves howl all around us and sometimes come up to us as friendly as my brother Max's German shepherd, to lick my hands, but I have to stop them from ruining my nails.

Now the Gypsies are afraid, and even *I'm* getting the creeps as we drive across empty landscape, wolves howling like a chorus out of Hell, blue lights flickering in the dark forests, the Carpathians rising up and up around us, all black and jagged. Morris points out this or that place from the tour, but even he doesn't seem to care any longer.

We're all solemn as we pull into the courtyard of Castle Dracula. Even the wolves are silent, streaming around us like a dark tide, filling the courtyard, wriggling into the castle through countless holes and crevices — I mean this place is a *ruin*. Haven't these big-time vampires any pride?

Morris and I climb out of our coffins, and we speak to the wolves in their own language. We tell them to leave our Gypsies alone for now, and we go inside.

The enormous doors swing open all by themselves, and more wolves run in. I'm sure they'd ruin the carpeting, if there was any. Overhead, bats swarm like a bunch of starlings. Outside, the wind howls, louder than the wolves ever did. Inside, it seems to *hum* in the rafters, like we're inside some huge pipe organ, and it really does give me the shivers, even if I am dead, and Morris is the wide-eyed tourist again, and all the big dope can say is, "Gosh, Honey Love, I always knew it would be like this."

I take him by the hand reassuringly, and say, "It's all right. I'm with you." And we walk through the cobwebs without breaking them, down into the castle's crypt.

But in the crypt it's very different: low ceilings, flickering electric lights, coffins wired for cable, and one of them open, with CNN going on a screen set into the lid. Newspapers everywhere, the *Times* of London, *The Wall Street Journal*, a bunch more, in Russian, Japanese, whatever, and finally, after we walk past rows and rows of filing cabinets, there, behind a desk covered with computers and phones and piles of paper, is the vampire king himself, Count Dracula, lord of the undead, once Voivode of Wallachia, called the Impaler, the perpetrator of so many horrors.

And I give him a piece of my mind, just like I came there to do, telling him *all* about Morris's ties and the smarmy tour guides and Miss Slinko's nails and

the uncomfortable, cheap coffins, and the bumpy roads and how awful the Gypsies drive and how bad their jokes are, how I'm missing all my soap operas from having to sleep in the daytime, and how *tired* I am of accosting tourists with that stupid map of Bucharest while my husband thinks he's in some old-time horror movie and —

The Count rises, his face contorted with rage.

I grab Morris by the bat-tie and yank him forward.

"Just look at this, will you?" I say to the Count. "Look what I have to put up with!"

"Madame," says the Count in a low, terrible voice, like the Crack of Doom heard through double-lined thick earmuffs, "I have *a great deal of evil to orchestrate in the world.* What makes you think that among all the legions of the damned I have time for *you*?"

Morris and I both stagger back from the awful power of his glare, but then I can't help myself. I've got to *laugh.* I mean, here is *the* Count Dracula, and is he wearing his medallion or even his cape? No, he's got on a plain white shirt like any office clerk, and his sleeves are rolled up and there's inkstains on the pocket and he's got a pencil behind his ear. I am not sure, but maybe he wears bifocals. He's just haggard and his hairline is receding to a point, and he's no more impressive than Morris, really, only taller.

But Count Dracula is shaking and screaming and the whole castle seems about to come down around our ears, so before he can ask what is so funny, I tell him.

"I'm sorry ... forgive me, but ... *you don't look one bit like Bela Lugosi!*"

He screams some more. He is not listening.

I have to continue giving him pieces of my mind. The place is a mess. I pick up a bunch of papers. It is requisitions for coffins, from 1917. If he hasn't got them now, why bother, I want to know. Then there's the meeting of the Trilateral Commission he was supposed to be at, a letter from Henry Kissinger that didn't get answered in twenty-five years, and some famous rock star who was supposed to get bitten and didn't get bitten. So much work is not getting done. I start to straighten up. I tell him, "Look at you. You got inkstains all over you. You don't brush your clothes. You can't be so sloppy. If you're going put your undead hands on the levers of the world, you got to wash them first. I'm telling you. I don't know how you ever got along before I arrived. You need someone like me around here to manage things."

That's it. That's *the end.*

I *think* the very last thing I hear is Morris burbling, "Gee, Mr. Dracula, Count, Sir, can I have your autograph?" but I can't be sure because everything gets confusing after that.

The Count raises his arms and I *imagine* he's got on the black cape like you'd expect, and he's a huge, snarling bat with legs. Then his minions are all around him, minions of minions, a world monopoly on drooling hunchbacks, an excess of glow-in-the-dark dwarves, slinky, barefoot vampire wives wearing just *rags* (the Count should be ashamed!), not to mention all those wolves, most of which are human; and they just *sweep* us straight out of Dracula's office, down, down into the lower crypts, into the uttermost abysses in the Earth's bowels (as Morris would put it) and then we're in our coffins again, with the lids hammered down so we can't get out.

Of course they had to bring in the Gypsies to do the dirty work. Silver nails. Only the Gypsies could touch them.

Okay, so maybe I have *kvetched* once too often, but what else was I to do? When something isn't right, it isn't right.

Grandma Esther would understand if she were here. Now I lie in the dark, and the only way I can go anywhere is in my dreams, and in my dreams I search for Grandma Esther, to explain everything and ask her what I should do.

Morris lies beside me, not too happy right now, but he is trying to be brave, and he whispers, "Don't worry, Honey Love, maybe Grandma will come and let us out, or a hundred years will pass and the coffin wood will rot, or even the Count will forgive us if we are patient enough."

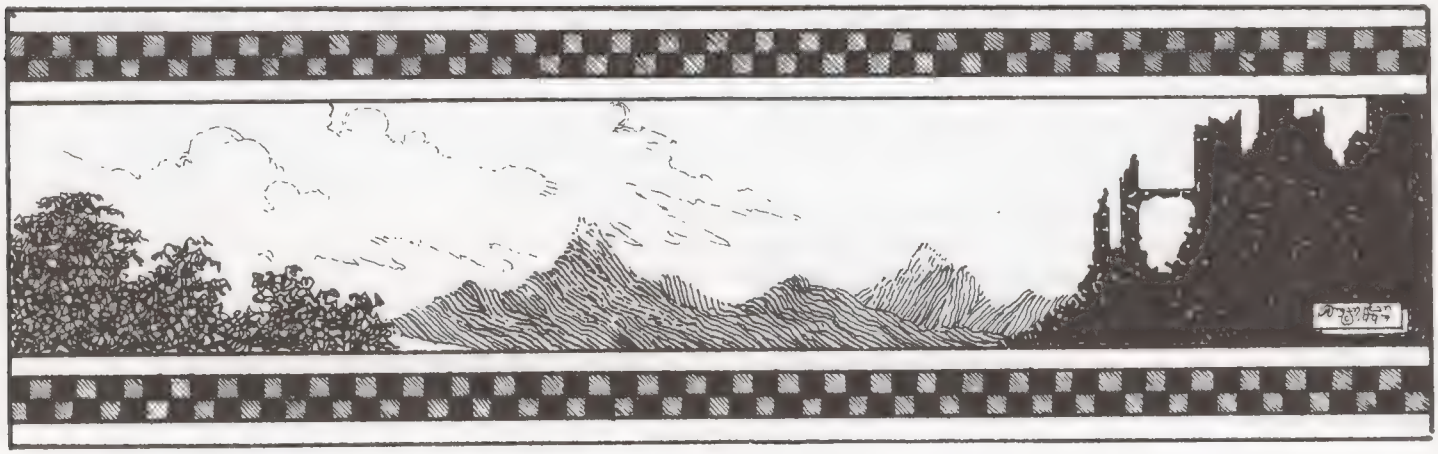
What can a vampire do under such circumstances, but be patient?

I know Morris is trying to help, and he even called me Honey Love, but still I can't forgive him. I know he's lying there, right beside me, still wearing one of his stupid ties.

❄

Darrell Schweitzer is the author of **THE MASK OF THE SORCERER, THE SHATTERED GODDESS, TOM O'BEDLAM'S NIGHT OUT**, and others. He has been nominated for the World Fantasy Award three times and won it (shared with George Scithers) once, as editor of *Weird Tales*. He gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Mattie Brahen C.Y.C. (Certified Yenta Consultant) with the idiom of this story.

Margaret Organ-Kean has illustrated for *Cricket, MZBFM,* and Wizards of the Coast (she created all the cards in The Great Dalmuti deck as well as some MAGIC cards).



Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

Letters

Rejected by the Best!

Thornton Kimes, San Francisco CA

I'm honored to be rejected by the best! "Empty Road" is my first fiction reject (recently had a poem rejected...). It was a gentle "no", too. I kept thinking, after mailing the short little monster, that my ears would burn and my nose grow a few extra inches, etc., etc., because, oh gawwwwd, it didn't meet the specs *exactly*. By the way, it would be nice if some day you folks would write something for those of us who are, um, "title challenged". "Empty Road" was the best I could do, nothing else came to mind for a name for the story! *MZBFM* #35 is the first issue I've read in about a year; don't ask, it doesn't make much sense to me either. "Maiden Phoenix" made me glad I'm not married. My legs would get too sore from being pulled often and well...

Editors have all kinds of theories about titles. (And every editor's theory is different from every other editor's.) — MZB

Let's hope it was only your reason for not reading that "doesn't make much sense" — and don't let it happen again! — reh

Valhalla

William A. Levinson, Philadelphia PA

I enjoyed Russell William Asplund's "Der Ring des Nibelungen", since I've 1) read the original story and seen most of the opera on PBS, and 2) read several books and articles that compare business to war. Foremost among these is General Carl von Clausewitz' "On War". Clausewitz says that war, like commerce, is a competition between organizations. Maybe there is a Valhalla for business "warriors" after all!

Well, if dogs to to heaven, then business people must! — MZB

Star Wars Wizard

Hayden Harker, Alexandria VA

I recently purchased a copy of your *Fantasy Magazine* (Issue #35) and found your editorial comments to be troublesome. I cannot rightly comment on the submission you received about Amazon women since I have not read the story. However, I do feel that your treatment of ***STAR WARS*** was simply incorrect.

I do not disagree that George Lucas is attempting to evoke images of magic and power by using the word "wizard". Rather, I think that Uncle Owen knows enough about Obi-wan's past that he can allude to great powers while using "wizard" in a derogatory fashion to dissuade Luke's interest in the "crazy old man". I realize people, as first time viewers, do not completely understand the potential depth of his knowledge until later in the film, but this could be considered an example of foreshadowing.

I simply feel that Uncle Owen (or George Lucas) is not attempting to claim that Obi-wan is some kind of great wizard who is crazy. In fact, most references to Jedis or "the force" throughout the film are demeaning and derogatory. If memory serves me correctly, Han Solo calls it a "hokey religion". Also, those who have mastered the force are referred to as Jedi Masters, not wizards. Until we are witness to the true power of the force in the subsequent films, we are presented with many non-believing people and their negative comments. I feel that Uncle Owen falls into this category.

Let us also think about "first time viewers"; neither of us is one. The surprise, intrigue and foreshadowing in any film exists for the first time you watch it. Once this is over, your perspective on the film is completely different. You mentioned that Tolkien explains what a hobbit is in the beginning of his epic. Anyone who is familiar with fantasy knows what a hobbit is. Does this mean that section of the book should be removed for people who have already read the book? Similarly, there are elements in ***STAR WARS*** which are seen differently (and are possibly unnecessary) after the first time you see it. It is impossible to produce a book or film that remains the same after multiple readings or viewings; once you know the characters, the plot and the ending, your entire perspective is altered.

STAR WARS is not a perfect film but I feel that your critique of it is unsubstantiated. Also, it is only problematic for a writer to state that a character is a wizard before showing us that he is, if it is true. Personally, I am not completely convinced that Obi-wan is a wizard.

That makes two of us! Maybe what annoys me is that **STAR WARS** *is a science fiction movie, and "wizard" is a term from fantasy, so its creators have used mixed tropes if not metaphors. — MZB*

Every creator of a fantasy novel tends to take liberties with the "known characteristics" of certain "stock characters" — look at the range of depictions of, say, pookas just two items, the film ***Harvey*** *and Emma Bull's novel* ***WAR FOR THE OAKS****! George Lucas seemed to endow his "wizards", his members of the "hokey religion", with psychic powers, though perhaps not with magic, exactly. And as you suggest, perhaps he is revealing more about the person doing the telling than he is about the person being described. — reh*

A Plea for Edification

James Heiser, Decatur IL

Greetings! According to what I read in the 1997 *Novel & Short Story Writer's Market*, you are receiving between 2,600 and 10,400 unsolicited manuscripts a year. Well, if you are already drowning in paper, why not add three or four more manuscripts a year? Please send me a copy of your guidelines. I have enclosed a #10 SASE.

Well, I hope you send us something we can print. — MZB

And if we print one of your stories, don't "drop out" and never send us another. Far too many people (probably having realized how much work it really IS to write and sell a short story) do this. Thank you for requesting guidelines in advance. Far too few people do. — reh

And furthermore...

(a reader responds to our questionnaire)

Greg Koster, Bremerton WA

What types of stories do you most prefer?

I like my fantasy modern. My appetite for medieval history is all too easily sated, and as far as Arthur goes, I wish

he had never been born. **Please Note:** This theoretical requirement is easily defeated by a good story. Theoretically, I shouldn't have cared for "Thin Man", but it was the best by ten miles in the issue. Nor can I readily think of any story since issue #13 (when I came on board) that exceeds it. This story should win some awards if there is any justice in the world.

Would you like to see more advertising?

Yes, yes yes. Let's get those dollars rolling in. Get those authors'/artists' rates up, make the magazine longer, get the magazine out more often....I would prefer pages two and three should have the contents pages, not advertising. I detest magazines where you have to flip through the first section, hunting for the contents pages. But if this means giving up advertising, I will grumble, hunt, and flip.

Further comments:

The interviews that Darrell Schweitzer has been conducting for you have been superb. I hope you can persuade him to continue. How about articles on fantasy, and its practitioners? Martin Gardner wrote one on L. Frank Baum for *F & SF* in 1955 that has not been surpassed. Something along that line would be great. How about a history of *Unknown*? *U* is always praised as a great magazine, but it is surprisingly difficult to find the fiction that was printed there. Algis Budrys might be willing to write something on this.

How about MZB reminiscing on writers and editors she has known? She could tell a great many stories, I think, and I'd like to hear them.

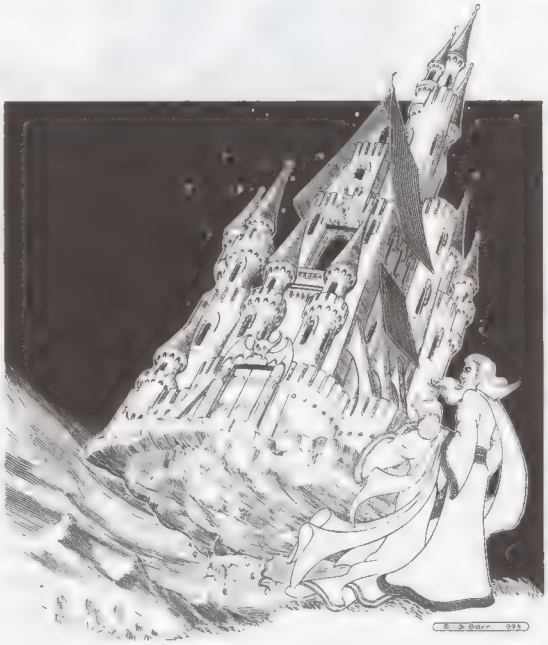
Our payment rates to authors are already among the best in the business. — MZB

Glad you enjoy Schweitzer's interviews; you will see more of them in the future. Hope you caught "Kvetchula" in this issue, possibly Darrell's lightest fiction to date.

I'm not sure Marion's reminiscences belong in her column here, but they might make a fine book!

Alexandria Digital Literature (http://www.alexlit.com) is hoping to solve the problem you mention: the difficulty of finding the short fiction that was printed in Unknown *and other out-of-print magazines. Certainly the web looks more and more like the future of fan publishing, though it can be a nightmare for professional authors and artists trying to earn a living from their creative efforts. Alexandria is to be commended for its focus on paying royalties for all stories downloaded by readers.*

As you suspect, advertising is necessary if we hope to continue printing issues even as infrequently as we do. I hope Marion doesn't decide to publish monthly, though — I've already been there, done that, got the ulcer, on a different magazine. — reh



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I No Longer Own an Ax

by David J. Sosnowski

I no longer own an ax.

I did once, it's true, I did; but I lost it to a wicked woman from a wet woodpile, many years ago.

What a creature! I'll never forget her, large as a portly possum, carrying her youngsters on her hairy carapace. (They do that, really.) Irrationally terrified of all arachnids, when she leapt from under the unsplit logs, I swung without thought, embedding my ax in her back. She was outraged! Swinging one flocculent forearm about, she grabbed the implement out of her flesh and began chasing me around the grounds with it.

Not generally an unreasonable sort, I genuinely don't mind being pursued with an ax in a fair altercation with another biped — but this monstrosity had me outdone in turf-running limbs by eight to two. Not only that, I'm certain the wounds I'd inflicted adrenally drove her to still greater speed. Of course, she was a wolf spider, *Lycosidae*, too: The hunt was in her ugly blood; the lust of chase in her very veins and vilest natural urges.

And you should have seen her choppers. A foot long, easy, each of the pair. Dripping foul-smelling drool. Furrowed edges like chainsaw blades, they looked like she could take down a sequoia with them in a single sinister swipe.

I ran like hell.

Thought I'd lost her when, rapidly rounding the corner of the house, my own glands pumping, I hurtled myself ten feet in the air and hauled my carcass into the arms of my old friend *Acer*, attempting to hide amid her leaves. That didn't last long, though. The ax-wielding horror quickly found me; began chopping the damned tree down from under me with deliberate ease. She must have been part lumberjack at that: Four fell strokes, and *Acer* was dead wood; her maple life selflessly given in my defense, true friend.

As the aged maple toppled to the ground, I flew through the air as though propelled by God's own wrath and a kick in the pants from an irate Dad. Somehow I made it to the roof of the house, grasping desperately at the gutter, pulling myself to the shingles just in time to miss having one of my better appendages gruesomely removed by the blade.

Well, of course, spider she was, she could climb the walls. And huge as she was, dragging a ten-pound ax up the siding was barely a noticeable encumbrance. Did you know spiders grin? I didn't. But she did. Grin, that is; all the while hissing and spitting a demonic laugh.

But I'm nothing if not resourceful. No rabid arachnid was about to get the best of me, no sir. Besides, there was nothing for it. She had me on the run toward the high end of the house, and I relished jumping off into the rose bushes less than getting axed. (At least the latter is a speedy demise, preferable to a thorny one.) So, head first, instead, down the chimney I dove. Thank my stars the fire was only at ember.

Thinking the beating heat of it would stave her off, I stopped to briefly rest, and extinguish the burning bottom of my trousers. Good thing I remained attentive, I'll tell you. Yes, you guessed it, with my typical ill luck of the day, she was so enraged she ignored the flames, flounced down the flue just moments behind me.

Worse, I'd chosen to tangle with the only spider in history to have completed, *summa cum laude*, the entire MIT

curriculum in aeronautical engineering. In no time at all, the belligerent bugger had fashioned an aerofoil from her webbing, and there she was, floating from the hearth across my parlor at me, playing the air currents like a gull in a shore-break breeze. As the heat rise tapered, she began spinning the ax in her mandibles, using it as a propeller, clearly intending to Cuisinart me with it.

It was a tense situation. Never one to fight a battle dirty, I'd wanted to keep this match clean as any other I'd met. Then again, this was something of an extraordinary turn of affairs, and the prospect of being neutered or murdered by a crazed flying nightmare bent to breakage my usual moral resolve.

It was despicable of me. I know it was wrong, terribly so, but something in my psyche just snapped like a twig. I went badly berserk, I contritely confess, and made the dreadful decision: Chemical warfare it would have to be.

By now, deranged, I threw fear to caution and sent them both packing. Lunging through the archway to the kitchen, I plunged to the cabinet beneath the sink, tore the doors from their hinges, and hauled out the case of Raid I keep to handle such eventualities. Ripping the carton apart with my teeth, I scooped out the first of the aerosol bombs, lurched unsteadily back to the living room — sick at heart that I was about to violate the Geneva Convention — and started spraying, long and hard and mean, cackling madly as I did.

Terrorized, frenzied, she did an eight-legged hopping cha-cha a dancing kangaroo would envy, her hissing now raised to a Niagaran rumbling roar. She chopped up my Chippendale into chips and dales. She chomped my Chirico into canvas and crepuscular. Then she messed on the mat and sprang for the exit, swinging. Two swoops of the ax, she had the oaken door down and was through it, running along the street.

And myself, by now, completely unstable, I knew no mercy or mental constraint. She was going to get it, and I was going to give it: Death to the abominable arthropod, by my mortal hand!

Good thing I'd left the pickup running at the curb that autumn morning. (You know how it is — some days you just have that feeling you should leave the motor idling? Call it a premonition.) Diving through the Mazda's window with my carton of ordnance, I slammed the shift into gear and jammed an empty Raid can against the accelerator. In no time at all, I was off after her, riding outrigger style on the open door, steering with one foot, and spraying can after can of Raid at my fleeing nemesis.

It was a devil of a chase. Mile after mile, can after can. Screaming up I-95, twice I missed her as she craftily skipped off first a Connecticut, then a Massachusetts exit, and I was forced to double back to find her, each time. Just below Portsmouth, she hitched a ride with an eighteen-wheeler. Incensed, I rammed. As the brute Mack truck rolled over into a roadside ditch, the hirsute bitch scrambled from the cab, and the pursuit resumed, league upon league.

I finally lost her somewhere in the woods of Maine, my last spray can depleted, her still running with the ax, somewhere a little west of Augusta. Never did find her.

So, as you can plainly see, although it's true I did once hit a woman with one, I no longer own an ax.

I do still keep several cans of Raid around, though.

You just never know.

❄

David J. Sosnowski was initially conservatory-trained as a concert pianist and composer, but founded a computer research and development consulting firm in the year he graduated university, 1975. He remains at the helm of the corporation, but is also an active composer, technical writer, occasional computer columnist, and published poet. His favorite fruit is cherries.

Kaja Foglio has been a successful fantasy artist since 1993, when she started work on Magic the Gathering™. She recently took over Slag Blah Entertainment Inc., (publisher of the XXXenophile Game) and started her own company — Studio Foglio. These days she spends most of her time running the two businesses, but still makes time for fun art assignments. You can see more of her work by visiting her website at www.studiofoglio.com.

Artwork by Kaja Foglio

Portrait of My Wife

by Judy McCrosky

I see you are admiring my portrait. My friend, you laugh, yes, you're right. It's not my portrait, it's not a picture of me. It is of my dear late wife.

Her skin is tinged with the blush of a newly opened rose. Can you not feel its softness, like that of rose petals? And her hair, see how it shines with such a healthy glow. My wife was very lovely.

You want to know why I call it my portrait? No, I didn't paint it, well, not really. Here's the artist's signature in this corner, see, it says "Driscoll".

I know the signatures on paintings in this house don't mean anything. But I didn't paint this one. Really. Have I become so talented even you are fooled?

Do you know the name Driscoll? He was a very famous artist. Not famous like Eakins or Homer. By the way, the paintings you will sell as theirs are in that corner. But I digress. Driscoll was a very well-known portrait painter.

Ah, you're remembering. Yes, there was some sort of scandal attached to the name, not very long ago.

You don't seem to be as taken with this portrait as I would have liked. What's that? You think the picture is of a very lovely woman but she looks somehow flat. The painting lacks the depth of the sitter's personality that brings a portrait to life. It's technically very well done, but it's lifeless.

Sit down. Will you have a drink? It's interesting you should say that. Very interesting. Your reputation as a perceptive art critic is well deserved.

But you're wrong about this painting. It's a great masterpiece. It's very true to life. Driscoll was one of the greatest talents of our generation. All my wife's friends were done by him. They'd wait months, sometimes even years, to sit for him. And when he was finished with them, when the painting was complete, those women were most sorry their time with him was over.

His reputation was made because he always painted the women as if they were beautiful. I think they all were, to him. The portraits were good, the woman in the painting looked very much as she did in real life, but she was beautiful. It's because Driscoll could see into her heart, and he painted the love he found there. Driscoll's women were beautiful because they were women in love.

You're skeptical. I'm right, though. Yes, you're the art critic, owner of a famous gallery. But I know.

Here's your drink. Did you know my wife's was the last painting he did?

I know about Driscoll's secret because I knew my wife. And I knew the portrait. I was there at its conception. I watched it develop.

Driscoll was not attractive. He was a weasely man, and his spine was not quite straight. Some sort of birth defect, I assume. His eyes were small, his nose was large, but he did have a very charming smile. Charming to the ladies, that is. His talent lay in his style, both on canvas and with women. He painted what he wanted to see and his talent was in getting women to love him.

You're getting personal now, my friend. I know it's not uncommon for wives to stray, and it's certainly not unknown for women to feel attracted to their portrait painters, men with whom they spend large amounts of time. The artist pays a lot of attention to these women, attention they're perhaps not accustomed to getting from their husbands.

But remember, Driscoll's career ended in disgrace, and he has since disappeared into obscurity. Ah, you're beginning to recall the scandal. It concerned the death of one of his women sitters. It was first thought she committed suicide, until suspicions of murder arose. Driscoll disappeared before he could be questioned, which of course confirmed his guilt.

You are looking at me. I see a flush of discomfort on your cheeks as you understand. Yes, the scandal concerned his last sitter, the last portrait he painted. My dear wife.

I think I'd like to tell you about it. It's a great honor for you. No one else knows. I'm still a little angry with you, my friend. Our earlier discussion was not one that should take place between business associates.

And we are associates, are we not? Your calling me a forger was most unkind. I create old masterpieces and my talent is such they cannot be distinguished from the originals. You sell the works, telling the buyer they are original. We're partners, a team. I'm sorry you're in need of money but really, blackmail is so crass.

What's that? You say you'll claim you didn't know the works you purchased from me, a well-known collector of art, were forgeries? Everyone will believe you are an innocent victim?

I will tell you the story. Here, I'll put the bottle right on this table, so you can help yourself whenever you want more to drink.

My wife was a contented woman, happy with her life with me. Her life revolved around me, I might say, and she took joy in all the little things she did to make my life more comfortable. Her only sorrow was that we never had children. I was all she had.

And so, when she asked if she could have her portrait painted, I thought it unreasonable to refuse. She insisted on Driscoll because all her friends had been done by him.

When Driscoll arrived at the house, with his easel and paints, he fawned over my wife, kissing her hand, bowing. I thought this a bit excessive, but some artists are like that.

The two of them spent a lot of time together. My wife told me Driscoll needed to see her in different settings, under different light. She wore many different outfits for him, changing her clothes sometimes several times a day. All this was necessary, she said, so he could decide on the most advantageous pose. They went out of the house, often, and she said this was because he was considering painting her in an outdoors setting.

Once in a while I looked into the room I let him use as a studio, and I saw he was indeed working hard, for there were many sketches and drawings of my wife scattered about. It seemed he was warming to his subject, for the drawings became more detailed as the days passed. She metamorphosed from a rough charcoal likeness to a detailed line drawing. And then he added color. Chalk, and the colors were wonderful, with them my wife began to glow and the pictures became more and more lifelike.

He finally made his decision, and work on the portrait itself began. He decided to paint her in the studio, sitting before the window as you see her, dressed in that pale blue gown. My wife told me, with pride, it was her idea to pull the dress off her shoulder on the one side. Driscoll thought it a wonderful idea, she told me, he said it brought out her vulnerability and gave him a chance to paint the lovely creamy pink of her throat.

The portrait advanced quickly. Each night, I went into the studio when no one else was there, and pulled the velvet drape away from the canvas, and each night I saw the changes as the work progressed. The details of her face appeared, the lines of her jaw, the way her hair curled back from her forehead, the tilt of her eyes. I had never known she had a dimple in her right cheek, but the night it appeared on the portrait I looked at her, and it was there. It gave her face a pertness, a sauciness which I never noticed before, but it was there and I liked it. I had never before seen how alluring the curve of her lips was, and how her lower lip was just so slightly fuller than the upper, but when I looked at her, it was. I saw in the portrait how inviting that mouth was, and I imagined her running her tongue over her teeth, those red lips glistening as they were parted in a smile. An inviting smile. But every night she was tired. It was hard work, she told me, sitting for an artist. She pouted that lower lip, and she smiled at me, causing her dimple to peek out, and said she had never thought just sitting all day would be so exhausting.

They didn't stay in the studio all day, though. I often looked out through my window and saw them walking down the lane towards the woods. It was the light, my wife told me. Driscoll had to have the right light for the portrait. That was why he was such a good artist, he was compulsive about his work. Everything had to be perfect, exactly as he wanted it. She was sure the end result would be worth it.

I realized she hadn't seen the portrait yet. Driscoll, she told me, never let anyone see a work in progress. I didn't tell her, and he obviously didn't know, that each night I entered the studio, stripped away the velvet draping, and saw the new growth.

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

The portrait was beautiful. My wife was beautiful. Before my eyes, every night, they changed. The color of their skin became richer, rosier. Their blue eyes sparkled, the tilt of the eyes became more pronounced, and the color deepened. Sometimes it looked as if those eyes were lowered bashfully, and a red stained the cheeks. Sometimes I seemed to see the mouth pout, the lips becoming fuller, redder, as if bruised by a kiss. Sometimes the satiny skin of their necks and cheeks was reddened, as if scraped by another skin rougher and harsher. But when I blinked and looked again, all was as it was. The portrait gazed at me, my wife smiled and rolled over to go to sleep.

The portrait's eyes fascinated me. They seemed to know things I didn't. They saw things I could never hope to see. There was a smile in them, too, as if they were amused. I started to spend more and more time in that studio, staring at the revealed painting. Such beauty. How could I have never seen it in my wife before? And not only beauty. I saw happiness, laughter, joy, fulfillment. These were all attributes my wife had always had. I told you before, she was a contented woman. But then, when I looked at the painting, and when I looked at her during the brief times we had together, I saw more. I saw a woman who was beautiful, not only outwardly, but inside too. A woman who knew she was beautiful.

You, no doubt, are laughing at me. How, you say, could he have been so blind? But it happened so gradually.

One day the scales fell from my eyes. I sat in my study, looked out the window, and I saw them. My wife carried a parasol, a soft pink in color, and as they walked their shoulders brushed and for a moment both heads were hidden from sight behind the parasol. It happened in a very brief time, but it was enough. I knew. The beauty my wife showed was the beauty of a woman who loved, and who was loved in return.

A terrible darkness filled me and I ran from the room. I ran to the front door, tore it open, took a few steps out, but then I stopped. What was I doing? Running after them, hoping to catch them in the act? I returned to the house, I sat, here in this very room, and I waited until my heated mind cleared. And then I thought.

My wife was devoted to me. Why would she fall in love with this funny-looking artist? That she had, I couldn't deny. I understood, now, her exhaustion every night, the long hours they spent away from the house. But what I couldn't understand was why. What power did this Driscoll have over her?

I stood up and went to the studio. The portrait glowed in the late afternoon sun that slanted in through the window. The woman I saw was smiling, her head thrown back, her eyes looking far past me to some distant paradise. A terrible suspicion filled my mind. Before I could fully consider it, I seized a paint brush. It was a small one with a fine tip. I dipped it in some red paint drying on the palette, and I drew a thin red line on the portrait's cheek. I couldn't be sure, but for a moment I thought I saw a flash of surprise and pain in the blue eyes.

I returned to my studio to wait. I didn't think about the matter any more, I immersed myself in my own painting. When my wife returned, I would know.

It was late before she came home. I was in the bedroom, getting ready for bed. She walked into the room and went directly to her vanity table. She sat before the mirror and unpinned her hair. In the mirror, I saw it. On the image's cheek, a thin red line. A scratch.

I went up behind her, rested my hands lightly on her shoulders. How is the portrait progressing, I asked.

Very well, she said. Driscoll still hadn't let her see it, but he assured her it was the best he'd ever done.

My dear, I said, your face, you are hurt. My hands slid gently along her

shoulders, to her neck. My fingers reached for the soft hollow at her throat. Was it my imagination, or did the pulse that beat there suddenly quicken?

It's nothing, she said, a scratch. We were walking down the lane as Driscoll explained how an artist sees the light, and I tipped back my head for a moment and was blinded by the sun. And in that very moment I walked beneath a tree with low hanging branches and a twig scraped my cheek. It's of no importance.

I said nothing. My fingers tightened for a moment, but I quickly released her and went to bed.

I lay awake long after my wife's even breathing told me she was asleep. I cannot explain to you the enormity of the emotions I experienced that night. What was happening was clearly Driscoll's fault. His guilt was clear.

I am not the sort of person who meekly sits back and takes what others deal out. No. My wife, my devoted wife, she was involved too. I had to punish her, much as I knew it would hurt me to do so. And so I made up my mind. For my wife, because I loved her, the end would be merciful. For Driscoll, I would see that he suffered for a very long time.

I got up and put on my bathrobe. It is a blue one, with black piping. I put on my slippers too. I walked down the hall to Driscoll's studio. I lit only one lamp, a small one which poured a wash of light on the easel. The rest of the room was dark, but I found his brushes and paints. I turned to the easel on which the canvas, draped in velvet, stood. I reached out. The velvet felt harsh and stiff to my fingers, I jerked it aside. It fell to the floor in a dark pool. The portrait of my wife was revealed in all its loveliness, but I didn't stand and gaze at it as I had all the other nights. I wasted no time. I uncapped the paints, squeezed colors onto the palette. I took a brush in my hand.

Driscoll makes much of fine detail. But painting in his style was no challenge to a man of my talent. I added a tree in the background first. It was important that she be found outside. Then I mixed new colors, yellows and browns and grays. The colors of rope.

As I worked, it seemed to me the picture changed subtly, although I couldn't be sure. The eyes, which had been so full of laughter, now held uncertainty. I took a new brush, dipped it in the color I had mixed. I placed the tip of the brush against the hollow of the portrait's throat. This time I was not mistaken, the eyes widened. I began to paint.

When I was done, it lay there, slack. I painted in the braiding, and even the rough little fibers on the surface. It wasn't a bad job. It was painted in Driscoll's style. No one could know he didn't paint it. I stood back and looked at the portrait. The woman I saw was still beautiful, but her eyes stared at me now, and in them I saw denial, horror, and terror.

I cleaned up the studio. I recapped the paint, washed the brushes. Everything was as it was before except for the velvet drape, which I left lying on the floor.

I went to my bedroom. My wife was not there. I saw she had left her nightdress on the bed and the dress she wore that day was gone. It was her sitting dress, the dress the portrait wears. I tidied up. No one could tell my wife had been in the room that night. It was as if she never returned from her walk with Driscoll.

I returned to the studio. I picked up the velvet and covered the portrait. As I did so, I saw that the rope was now tight about her neck.

The next morning, very early, I went back. I removed my additions. I worked until the portrait looked much as it had before. But the picture was changed. It lacked something. Gone was the vivacity, the personality it showed before. The woman in the painting looked then exactly as you see her here today. Lifeless.

I summoned the police, reported my dear wife was missing. I told them about the portrait sitting, how much time she had been spending with Driscoll, how the last time I saw her she was walking down the lane with him.

They went out and searched. It didn't take them long to find her. I was prostrate with grief.

When I was left alone, I telephoned to Driscoll. I told him of my wife's death. I told him the police were on their way to question him. He tried to bluff, tried to sound saddened by my wife's death. None of that mattered. Because then I told him I still had his paints and canvases. I had enough for another portrait. And more important, I told him, I knew his style. I could paint exactly as he did. Maybe, I said, I will paint a portrait of him.

And so now, my friend, you know. You know all. I see you are shaken. The hand which reaches to pour the last of the whiskey into your glass is trembling.

Are you not impressed with the cleverness of my solution? Are you not glad to see affirmed, yet again, the breadth of my talent? I see you're not. There's horror in your eyes as you stare at me. But it doesn't matter.

You see, I never did paint a portrait of Driscoll. For one thing, by the time the police reached his home, he had vanished. They look for him still, but they have never found him. It gives me great pleasure to think of his life as it must be, always running, his career ended.

But I'm curious. I made successful changes to a painting of his. I proved I can paint in his style as successfully as I can that of other artists. But the supreme challenge lies before me. To create a new portrait. An original work of art. Could I do it?

It would be an interesting experiment. It would serve a dual purpose. It would enable me to know. I hate not knowing. And it would ensure your continuation in our most profitable partnership.

I've been dissatisfied with your attitude of late. I won't even lower myself to mention your suggestion of blackmail. Such things have no place in a business relationship such as ours. It wounds me when you call me a forger. I wish to be referred to as the great artist I am. And I no longer find that our current division of the profits accurately reflects the contribution each of us makes. I think we should negotiate.

What do you think? Should I paint your portrait?

❄

Judy McCrosky was born in 1956 in Aberdeen, Scotland and lives in Canada. Her education was in clinical psychology but after working in the field, she decided she didn't want to be a psychologist after all when she grew up. She worked as a weaver and as a musician and finally, with a sigh of relief, discovered writing. She has published two collections of literary short stories and one romance novel, but now concentrates on speculative fiction and feels she has come home.

Armand Cabrera is a self-taught artist and says, "I've been at it for a million years" — really since 1980. He has worked for Lucas Films on their *STAR WARS* games and at Electronic Arts.

THE CHIROMANCER

by Jacqueline M. Shank

Alfie poked a finger at the tiny cow standing, head down, on the farmer's callused palm. Her left forefoot was planted firmly on the break in the farmer's life line.

"Do you have a black and white cow?" Alfie asked.

The farmer chuckled. "I have a whole herd of black and white cows, boy. What of it?"

Alfie looked up. "Does one of them have a broken horn?"

"That would be old Molly," the farmer said. "Why? What do you see?"

"There is a little break in your life line, right here." Alfie pointed. "That's at about the age you are now, sir."

"And what has that to do with old Molly?"

"There's a, um, I see a broken-horned cow there," Alfie said. He tried to make his voice sound mysterious, not shaky. He'd only been reading palms for a week, and had just begun to rather enjoy it. And now this. He hadn't been warned about seeing cows in the clients' hands. "Be careful of that cow, sir," he said.

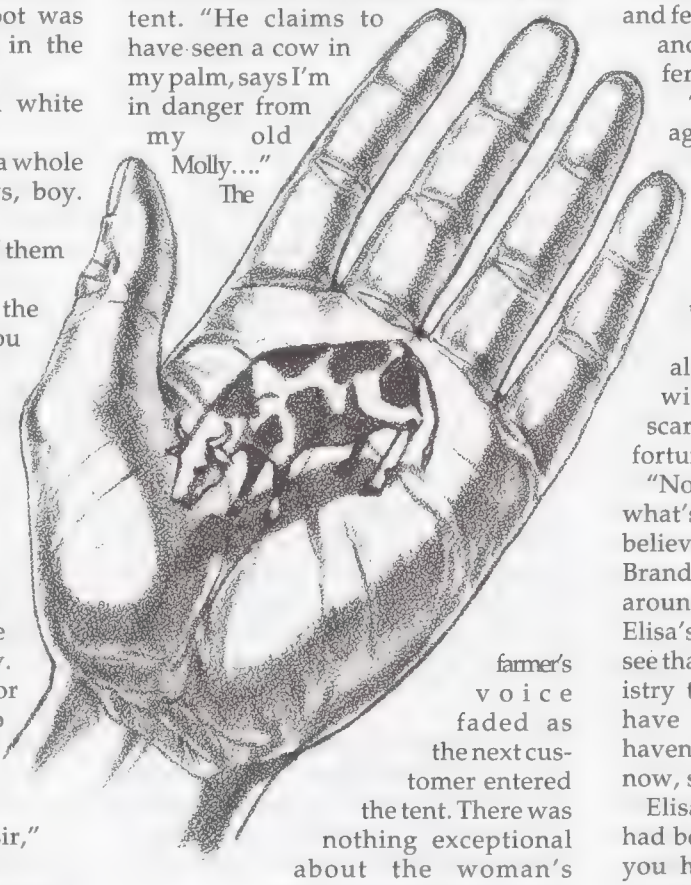
"Nonsense, boy," the farmer said. "Molly is a gentle old thing."

The image faded. "All the same, sir, you'd better watch her for the next few weeks. She's going to endanger your life." The farmer scowled and Alfie added hastily, "But if you get past this, you'll live a long, long time. See how long your life line is."

"That's good to know," the farmer said.

Just then Brandt entered the tent. "What's taking so long in here?" he demanded. "Alfredo, there's a line of people wanting their palms read. Why the delay?"

The farmer turned. "Brandt," he said, "you have a real gem here." He laughed, and walked with Brandt out of the tent. "He claims to have seen a cow in my palm, says I'm in danger from my old Molly...." The farmer's voice faded as the next customer entered the tent. There was nothing exceptional about the woman's hand, and Alfie went back to his line of patter.



"But I don't *want* to read palms!" Alfie had exclaimed, two weeks ago. "I want to work with the animals. That's why I joined your Troupe, to work with animals."

Brandt shook his head. "Not so," he said. "You joined the Troupe because you wanted to get away from your home, and from being apprenticed to a dyer." When Alfie drew breath to protest, he held up his brown hand, silencing him. "I can understand that. But you agreed, when you joined, that you would do any job that came along."

"And I have," Alfie protested. "I've cleaned the cages, I've hauled water and feed, I've helped set up the wagons and tents, I've done all kinds of different jobs for you."

"You've been a big help," Brandt agreed, "and you've been very willing, and I appreciate it. But Elisa is leaving us day after tomorrow, and when she is gone we will need a reader of palms. There is no one else who is free to do it."

"Oh, Brandt, please, I really, really don't want to get mixed up with forecasting the future, it's scary. And besides, boys don't tell fortunes."

"Nonsense." Brandt laughed. "Is that what's bothering you? Have you been believing it's all real?" Alfie nodded. Brandt laughed again and put his arm around the boy's shoulder. "Wait until Elisa's told you what to do, Alfie. You'll see that there is no more reality to palmistry than there is to the dreams we have when we sleep. And if boys haven't told fortunes before, they do now, starting with you."

Elisa smiled when Alfie told her he had believed in her art. "Let me show you how it's done. It's really quite simple. It's a matter of guessing correctly. The better you guess, the more people believe in you, and the more they believe, the more they'll pay. The important thing is, tell them things that will make them happy, even if you think you see bad things.

"Now, look at the clients carefully while they're at the entrance to the tent. Farmers, merchants, craftsmen, wealthy or poor, size them up while they stand there blinking.

"Then, be sure you look at both hands...." She had droned on and on, talking of calluses and lines and mounts until he felt dizzy.

"I'll never remember all this," Alfie

Artwork by Jim Balkovek

protested, trying to stem the tide of verbiage.

"Well, of course not, not at first. But you will learn to fool them with words, you'll see."

"Where did you learn all this?" Alfie asked.

Elisa said, "I grew up knowing about it. My mother was a palmist. She taught me from the time I was very small."

"How can Brandt expect me to learn enough in one day to fool anyone into thinking I can read their palms, when you've done it all your life?" Alfie wondered desperately.

"You're right," Elisa said. "Tom's waited more than a year to marry me. He can wait another few days while I make sure you know enough to get along. Cheer up, Alfie, you'll be fine, the main thing is telling a convincing lie anyway. You must develop a clever line of patter."

Elisa had spent the next four days teaching Alfie. She showed him using her own hands, and his, and those of anyone else in the Troupe who stopped moving long enough for their hands to be firmly grasped.

When Brandt protested that she was wasting the Troupe's valuable time, she said, "Well, then, *you* teach the boy to read hands, you're the one who decided he would be your new chiromancer."

He drew a breath and Alfie thought he would commence one of his famous tirades, but he blew out the air, turned on his heel, and walked away.

"Chiromancer?" Alfie said.

She grinned. "Fancy word for palmist."

By the fifth day Alfie felt confident enough to put on the costume Elisa had invented, and accept a few paying customers.

Alfie wasn't sure what he thought, but Brandt said the costume was fine, though different from what he had expected. It was dark blue, which complemented Alfie's fair skin and blue eyes. It also happened to be the only piece of fabric Alfie was able to afford that was long enough to make a gown for so tall a young man.

For Elisa had decided that a gown would be best, even for a male palmist. "Like a wizard or a sorcerer," she explained, "My grandma had a storybook with pictures, and the wizard was wearing a dress."

"A robe," Brandt said. "We'll call it a robe. And it's a good idea, more impressive than the black breeches and a white shirt I thought of. I like it. I'll have Jeanne sew it up."

Jeanne was Brandt's sister, a clever seamstress who kept all the Troupe's costumes in repair. The gown was very simple, falling straight from Alfie's broad shoulders to the ground, with long sleeves and a plain round neck. With his face and hands scrubbed clean and his curly brown hair neatly combed, Alfie hoped that he looked impressive, standing quietly, hands folded at his waist.

The effect was somewhat lessened when he sat down and the robe crumpled in a heap at his feet, so he decided he would stand when with a client. His height, he hoped, would have the additional effect of intimidating people, so that whatever he said would go unquestioned.

He had, to his surprise, developed a fair line of patter, so that he actually began to have fun reading palms. When Elisa married her Tom, therefore, he smiled and wished her well and saw her off with scarcely a qualm. Brandt had decided that he would be called Alfredo, which sounded more dignified than Alfie.

Then this morning, after he had assured a grateful young bride that she would have five children, all of whom would live to support her in her old age, the entry to his tent had been darkened by the shape of a broad and obviously well-to-do farmer. He'd stopped suddenly when he realized that the palmist was a young man. "Here," the man had said, "what's become of what's-her-name, Lizzy?"

"Elisa has married Tom and gone to live on his farm," Alfie said. "I am Alfredo; I have replaced her. Show me your hands. If I do not tell you true, you need not pay," he added, as he always did.

He was either getting to be quite skillful at reading palms and chattering, or he had been exceptionally lucky so far, for no one had refused to pay.

The farmer had shrugged and held out both hands, palms up. Alfie began his usual spiel, telling the man what he already knew, that he was a successful farmer, that he was married, that he had, or would have, four children, that his farm would continue to prosper, and blah, blah, blah.

Suddenly Alfie's voice had stopped, and he stared, for there was the little cow.

Two days later, Alfie heard a commotion outside his tent. Since he didn't have a client just then, he stepped out to see what was the matter.

"It was true! It was true!" Alfie recognized the farmer's voice, shouting excitedly. "It happened just as he said. Old Molly just went crazy, she attacked me. If I hadn't been warned and watching, she would have run her good horn right through me. I've never seen anything like it, never, nor heard of any such thing either. Where's that boy, where's Alfredo?"

"Here I am, sir," Alfie said, stepping forward.

"I owe you my life, boy," the farmer said warmly, grasping Alfie's hand. "Here," he added softly, "you take this as a token of my gratitude."

Alfie's eyes widened at the sight of the gold crown the farmer had pressed into his hand.

Just after the show closed that night, Brandt appeared in Alfie's doorway. "Alfredo," he said, "that farmer's story will be spread far and wide by tomorrow, and then we'll all be busy, but especially you."

He sounded so severe that Alfie began to protest. "But sir, I did see a cow in the man's hand."

Brandt smiled broadly. "I've no doubt you did, my boy," he said, and winked. "I've no doubt of it. And since you will be working twice as hard from now on, on account of all the business you'll bring in, I've decided to raise your wages by half a crown a month."

Alfie had thought he might tell Brandt about the crown the farmer had given him, but changed his mind. "*And*," Brandt continued, "I'm going to have Jeanne make you a second robe, and I'll pay for the cloth. What color would you like?"

"Red," Alfie said.

The first day he wore the new red robe, Alfie's first customer was an indulgent mother with a boy of about ten. Alfie read all the usual good things in the woman's palm. Then he turned to the child. "Would you like me to read your palm?" he said. "No charge, in honor of my new red robe."

The boy held out both hands. Alfie could see a kind of pleading in the child's eyes, and wondered what he wanted so desperately. If I knew what it was, Alfie thought, I could predict

that he'd get it and make him happy.

Suddenly the small dirty right palm held a little brown dog, which sat quite still and cocked its head as if listening intently. "There is a brown puppy in your hand!" Alfie said. He knew by the delight in the boy's eyes that that had been what he wanted. He heard the boy's mother sigh.

"Very well, Caleb," she said, "I see that you and that mongrel were meant for each other." She smiled at Alfie. "Thank you for helping me to make up my mind," she said, and gave him two pennies.

Over the next few days Alfie found that the gift of seeing animals in people's hands was not a constant one, and was never at his command. When there was no animal he resorted perforce to his constantly perfected line of patter. Brandt raised his wages another half crown a month.

When there was an animal, he told the person about it, though often he had no idea what it meant. Once he saw, in a merchant's hand, a bird which struggled against the bars of a silver cage. He told the merchant, who sighed. "I suppose I'll have to let my daughter marry her blacksmith after all," he said. Alfie wondered what a caged bird and the merchant's daughter had in common, but didn't inquire.

One day when Brandt was nearby, Alfie had a hunch. "Let me see your hand," he said. "No, the right one." He examined Brandt's hand and then grinned at his employer. "There is a bear in your hand," he said. "A black bear, just like Esmeralda's Onyx. It's sitting up, waving its front paws."

Brandt quirked an eyebrow. "What does it mean, Alfredo?"

Alfie shrugged. "I don't know. I rarely do. I only tell what I see. Usually clients do their own interpreting."

"Huh. A bear. What on earth can a bear mean to me, other than a source of small income and large bother? That bear is a nuisance. I've often thought of getting rid of it, except that then I'd lose Esmeralda as well." Brandt paused, then gave Alfie a strange look and walked away.

In the next few days Alfie noticed Brandt watching Esmeralda. A week later, he saw them walking toward the town, hand in hand. Two days after that, Brandt announced to the company that he and Esmeralda were to be married a week from the following Sunday, and that the entire Troupe was

Artwork by Jim Balkovek

invited to attend the wedding, and the festive dinner that would follow. They would then pack all the tents and equipment and move on to Bridgetown.

This announcement was not a happy one for Alfie, for Bridgetown was the city he had run away from. He considered leaving Brandt's Troupe, but realized that he enjoyed being Alfredo the Chiromancer, and that he was not experienced enough to set up on his own.

Perhaps, he thought, the dyer to whom he was to have been apprenticed would not come to see Brandt's Troupe perform. And if he came, perhaps he wouldn't recognize Alfie. And perhaps even if he did recognize Alfie, he wouldn't cause any trouble.

Then Alfie remembered the gold crown, which he had kept carefully hidden since the farmer had given it to him. Perhaps if the dyer did make trouble, Alfie could use the crown to buy his freedom. Or perhaps ... oh, enough, he thought. I'll worry about Bridgetown when we get there.

As things turned out, he didn't see Bridgetown again for many years. The Thursday before Brandt's and Esmeralda's wedding, a richly dressed stranger, who wore a light mail shirt and a velvet cap with a long green feather, carried a sword, and rode a magnificent bay horse, came to visit Brandt's show. He was accompanied by a group of five mounted men at arms. Even Brandt was impressed, and bowed to the man, offering to have his Troupe put on a special performance.

Alfie, who had been staring, was struck dumb when the man dismissed Brandt with an abruptness that would have been called rudeness in a lesser personage. "I have come to have my palm read," he said. "And only that. Where is your famous chiromancer?"

Brandt seemed about to protest, but then his shoulders lifted slightly and he indicated Alfie's tent with a sweeping gesture. Alfie wondered frantically if he could crawl out the back of the tent before the man got there, but it was already too late. The man was dismounting at the entry, handing his reins negligently to one of the men at arms, and coming into the tent. Alfie drew himself up to his full height, and tried to look calm. It helped that he was taller than the man by several inches.

"I," the man announced, "am Sir Lionel Bingham." It was apparent from his manner that he expected Alfie to know that name, and perhaps fear it.

Artwork by Jim Balkovek

Thinking that his voice might tremble, for he *was* frightened, Alfie inclined his head slightly.

Apparently that was the right thing to do, for after a pause Sir Lionel held out his right hand. "What animal do you see there, boy?" he demanded.

"My name is Alfredo," Alfie said, surprised to hear that he sounded quite calm. "I must see both hands. And I do not see animals on command."

"*My* name is Sir Lionel Alexander Michael Applethorn Bingham, *boy*, and I am Chamberlain to the king. I do not require that you examine both my hands. I require only to know what animal you see in my right hand. If, as you say, you do not see animals on command, perhaps you can be persuaded." He spoke quietly, but there was a threat in his voice that made Alfie shiver.

He looked helplessly Sir Lionel's right hand, noting with some surprise that the hand was not soft and white but hard, callused, and extremely capable-looking. He also saw that while Sir Lionel had a strong and dominant head line, his heart line was faint, and his life line short.

"Well?" came Sir Lionel's voice, interrupting Alfie's terrified examination. "Name me the animal, boy, and do it now. I have other concerns."

No, you haven't, Alfie thought, *this is the most important thing in your life right now. I wonder why. And I wonder what to do. There isn't any animal there.*

"Well?" Sir Lionel said again.

"A, a *lion*, sir, I see a lion," Alfie said. He supposed he had picked that animal because of the man's name, for the only lion he had ever seen was a toothless old beast in a cage next to Onyx's, whose bones creaked when he moved.

Apparently it was the right answer, for Sir Lionel beamed. "Splendid!" he said. "That's just splendid. Describe him, please."

"Um," Alfie began. Patter, he reminded himself. If you can do it with lines and mounts, you can do it with lions. "He's standing on your head line, just here." He pointed, and then drew back his hand with a start. Coiled as if about to strike, at the end of Sir Lionel's life line, was a green snake exactly the color of the feather in Sir Lionel's hat.

"What's the matter?" Sir Lionel asked.

"The, the lion bared his teeth at me, sir. It startled me, that's all. Now he looks as if he's roaring, though I can't hear anything."

The snake turned its head and looked directly into Alfie's eyes. It smiled. And then it disappeared.

"Oh," Alfie said, trying to sound both calm and disappointed, "he's fading, sir. He's gone."

"Well done, boy," Sir Lionel said, satisfaction in his voice. "Pack your things, you're coming with me."

"Oh, but sir, I can't go with you." Alfie found his voice dwindling as Sir Lionel's strong right hand grasped his upper arm. "You are coming with me," Sir Lionel said, "to the king's court. It is an honor, boy, you ought to be pleased. You will have the opportunity to read the palms of the rich and powerful personages in Jandara. And in their palms," he added in a low voice, "you will see whatever animals I tell you to see. If you are dutiful and obedient you may yourself become rich."

The implied punishment for not being dutiful and obedient sent Alfie scurrying to collect his blue robe, his everyday clothes, his comb, his gold crown and his other coins. Everything else he left. While he was stuffing it all in a cloth sack, he thought about the snake, wondering what it could have meant. He hadn't known a snake could smile.

Sir Lionel hired a horse for Alfie, which nearly made up for being torn so abruptly from Brandt's Troupe. Alfie loved all animals, most especially horses, but had not had many opportunities before to ride. Now he had more time on horseback than was comfortable.

It took three days to reach Sir Lionel's home near Jandara, though Sir Lionel urged his men to as much speed as the horses could muster. They stayed the intervening two nights in fine rooms in grand inns. Alfie would have enjoyed his two nights on soft mattresses between clean, sweet-smelling sheets, had his body not been so sore and aching. By the time they reached Sir Lionel's home Alfie felt he had had all he ever wanted of riding horses.

The more he thought about this most recent turn in his life, however, the more pleased he was. He had enjoyed his time with the Troupe, and was grateful to Brandt for forcing him to learn to read palms. But here he saw a whole world of opportunity opening to him.

He wouldn't mind being rich for a change. Sir Lionel's home gave him some idea of the kind of thing a rich person can command. It was enormous, a mountain of gray stone, surrounded by a wall four feet thick and more than twenty feet tall and surmounted by a tall round tower with a pointed roof like a hat, from which flew a pennant, green with a gold lion upon it.

Sir Lionel had insisted they wait at his home an extra day so that his seamstress could create a suitable robe for Alfredo the Omniscient, as he had dubbed Alfie. When Alfie protested both the purple robe with its gold-embroidered parade of animals around the hem, and the appellation, Sir Lionel had said, "Nonsense, Alfredo, you must make a proper impression at court." It was the first time Sir Lionel had called him anything but "boy."

When the elaborate carriage in which they were to ride to court drove up before the door, Sir Lionel reached out a forefinger and pushed Alfie's chin up. "Close your mouth, Alfredo," he said. "You must not gape, no matter how impressive the sight. It detracts from the image of omniscience I wish you to project."

Alfie was no farm boy, beholding a city for the first time. But he found the city of Jandara breathtaking, so huge, so cacophonous, so noisome, so filled with the ostentatiously rich and the despairing poor, so beautiful and so ugly that it was simply indescribable.

If Alfie had thought Sir Lionel's mansion a grand residence, he discovered, when he stepped out upon the white marble of the courtyard and looked up — and up — at the palace, how wrong he had been. This enormous building, with its walls upon which three men could march abreast, its countless turrets and towers, its huge gold flags rippling in the breeze, its massive doorway at the head of a flight of marble stairs, its carved marble lions on either side of the door — this was the grandest residence in the country. Sir Lionel's was but an imitation. Or perhaps a miniature.

The flags each bore five black lions. Unlike those on Sir Lionel's pennants, which were rearing up on their hind feet, these were simply standing, heads up and alert, and looking to Alfie many times more noble than Sir Lionel's.

Trying hard to keep his composure, and not gape, he followed Sir Lionel up the stairs and through the door, into a vast entry hall whose ceiling was so high he was surprised there weren't clouds up there. The floors were pol-

ished black marble, and the walls were also marble, faintly pink. Windows high in the walls let in light. A red carpet ran across the floor and through another huge double door.

A man in white satin, with a gold sash slanting across his chest and a bunch of golden keys hanging from the lower end, met them at the door.

"Greetings, Sir Lionel," he said in a deep voice.

"Seneschal," Sir Lionel said, with a slight nod. "This is Alfredo the Omniscient, of whom all have heard."

"You are welcome, Alfredo," the Seneschal said. "Come this way. His Majesty is expecting you." He led them up the red carpet.

"His Majesty?" Alfie quavered.

"Certainly," the Seneschal said.

Sir Lionel said shortly. "If you are to read palms at court, Alfredo, you must start at the top, with the king."

"Please wait here until I have announced you," the Seneschal said, and walked away. Alfie looked around the room with wonder. Its arched ceiling was as high as that in the great foyer, but it was made of thin slices of white marble through which the morning sun shone with a gentle light. At the far end Alfie could see, hanging against the wall above a gold canopy, another gold flag with black lions.

"Under that canopy," Sir Lionel said, "is King Adelbert's throne. This is his throne room."

Alfie's mouth was too dry just then to answer.

The room was filled with richly dressed men and women, standing about in small groups and talking quietly. If any of them noticed Alfie and Sir Lionel, they gave no sign. The Seneschal had disappeared into the crowd.

Sir Lionel took Alfie's arm as they stood in the doorway. "Now then, young man," he said very softly, "the king has heard about your peculiar abilities, all the Court has heard, and he will want to know if you see an animal in his palm. You are to tell him that you see a rabbit, a gray rabbit."

"A rabbit, Sir Lionel? Isn't that kind

Artwork by Jim Balkovek

of insulting, for a king?"

Sir Lionel smiled. "Perhaps it is. Nevertheless that is what you will say." He held up a commanding hand. "You will say you see the rabbit regardless of what you actually see or do not see. Is that quite clear?"

Alfie, after observing the grim determination on Sir Lionel's face, nodded.

Far away down the great throne room Alfie faintly heard the Seneschal's deep voice announcing, "Sir Lionel Bingham and Alfredo the Omniscient."

Then people noticed him. He got more attention than he had ever wanted. He and Sir Lionel walked toward the throne and the crowd parted before them. Some of the people greeted Sir Lionel quietly, and some, Alfie noticed with surprise, turned away from him.

After a long, long walk Alfie found that at last they had covered the distance to the throne. Under the canopy, upon a dais, was an immense golden chair, inlaid with precious stones. Its arms were carved in the likeness of standing lions. It looked extremely uncomfortable.

Seated upon the throne, a hand on the head of each lion, was a very thin, very old man. He wore a golden cloak trimmed with black fur, and a slender gold crown set with a faceted black gem. Upon his left hand was a ring with a similar black stone.

"Alfredo the Omniscient, eh?" The old king smiled. He had a nice smile. I like him, Alfie thought, and then reminded himself that simple liking was hardly the appropriate emotion for him to have for a king. "I understand you sometimes see animals in people's hands. Is this true?" the king asked.

"Yes, sir," Alfie said.

"Well, come up here and see what you see in mine." The king held out his right hand.

Alfie went up the three steps to the throne, and took the king's thin and trembling hand in his own, as he had been accustomed to doing back in Brandt's Troupe. There was a murmur of disapproval from the people in the room.

"Never mind them," the king said quietly. "Just tell me what you see."

There in the king's palm was a lion. An old, tired lion, like the one he had often fed and watered before he became Alfredo the Omniscient. It was crouched with its forepaws tucked in, its head nodding as he had often seen Brandt's old lion do, as if it were very tired. It yawned, and he saw that it had few teeth left.

Alfie looked at the king, and then at Sir Lionel, standing at the foot of the dais, tapping one foot, as if to say, Get on with it, tell him about the rabbit.

Deliberately, Alfie moved, apparently so as to get the king's hand in a better light. But somehow he ended up standing between Sir Lionel and the king.

"I am supposed to say that I see a rabbit, Your Majesty," he said, softly, "but really, there is a lion there. He is rather old."

"That's all right," the king said, equally quietly. "I'm rather old myself. You're a good boy, Alfredo, and you must be careful while you are at court." In a louder voice he said, "A rabbit? A *rabbit!* That's a strange thing to find in the hand of a monarch. But perhaps it's the king of the rabbits." He laughed, and waved Alfie away, but not before the lion changed into the coiled green snake, which smiled at Alfie.

There was muttering among the people in the hall as Alfie and Sir Lionel walked back to the doorway. Some were smiling behind their hands, and some were glaring with disapproval. But all were looking at Alfie.

"Hold up your head," Sir Lionel muttered. "You are The Omniscient, and don't you forget it for a moment."

Alfie held up his head and tried to look omniscient. It was easier than he had thought, since he could look over the heads of, and hence down upon, most of the people in the throne room, both men and women.

In the following two weeks Alfie 'read' the palms of most of the people at the court. For each person, Sir Lionel specified the animal Alfie was to 'see'. Among the dogs, cats, horses, and falcons, there were also weasels, rats, mice, spiders, and vultures. But never another rabbit. Sometimes Alfie could guess at the significance of the animal; often he could not.

One evening Sir Lionel stopped in Alfie's room just before bedtime. "Tomorrow when you read the palm of Sir Humphrey Exford," he said, "you will see a poisonous snake, perhaps a viper." He turned on his heel and left the room, and therefore did not see Alfie turn pale.

For the green snake was always there, whenever he pretended to see some other animal. It always turned to look straight at him, and it always smiled. He had decided that it wasn't going to harm him, but still it made him nervous.

And all the while King Adelbert became weaker and more frail, seeming to become nearly transparent. Alfie was saddened one day when he came into the throne room, where he usually read people's palms, to find that the king was not there.

"Alas," said the Seneschal, sounding really sorry, "he is unwell."

Two days went by and the king did not return. He was rumored to be dying: of poison said some, of simple old age said others. A third group insisted it was simply a cold and His Majesty would recover.

But on the third day of King Adelbert's absence, the snake in the palm of a young countess, instead of being plain green, was striped with green and yellow, and it not only smiled at Alfie, it flicked its tongue.

Alfie, telling the young countess that he was very sorry but the only animal in her palm was a baby weasel, noticed that she was wearing a yellow ribbon around her right upper arm. It clashed with the gown and jewels she was wearing, a most unusual thing, for the countess was known at court as a paragon of fashion.

As he looked around and began to notice, Alfie realized that almost everyone was wearing a ribbon, some yellow and some green. Sir Lionel, he noted, was wearing green. Well of course, that was one of his colors. But the other was gold, which was near enough to yellow that Alfie began to hope that his dawning suspicions were wrong.

That night, however, just as he took off his fortune-telling robe, he felt a tingle in the palm of his right hand. Looking down he saw, with paralyzing horror, that the snake, which was now totally yellow, was coiled in his own hand.

He nearly screamed, but a calm, cold voice in his head said, "Be quiet." The snake was not smiling now, and its head was weaving back and forth, back and forth. "King Adelbert has just died," the voice went on. Then it repeated, sharply, as Alfie drew breath to cry out, "Be quiet. Sit down and listen to me."

Alfie followed these instructions quickly, for his wobbly knees gave out and he sat abruptly on his bed.

"There will be civil war," the voice continued, "as you have suspected, for the king's son is dead and he has no heir. Sir Lionel leads one faction, Sir Humphrey Exford the other. I think you do not wish to be caught in the bloodshed." Alfie shook his head, but could think of nothing to say.

"Therefore," the voice continued, "you must do this." It went on for some time, explaining step by step what Alfie was to do. Once Alfie tried to interrupt, but the voice was inexorable. Then the snake disappeared and the voice was silent.

Quickly Alfie tore off the robe, put on his shabby breeches and shirt from his days with Brandt's Troupe, and the new boots Sir Lionel had given him. He found his old sack and packed it with a spare shirt and breeches, his old boots, his comb, a bit of soap. After a brief mental tussle he included a small book about animals that he had borrowed from Sir Lionel's collection.

He put all his coins into a pouch, tied it with a leather thong, and put it around his neck, where it made a comfortingly heavy bulge under his shirt. He threw his cloak around his shoulders and picked up his sack.

He opened the door and peeked out. The hallway was empty, as were the stairs when he got to them, as was the entry hall at the foot of the stairs.

He opened the front door far enough to slip through, and sped silently down the curving drive to the road below. There he turned left and raced toward the edge of the city.

In a field on the west side of Jandara, he found the Circus Silenus, just beginning to pull away from where it had been camped for a week. It was moving slowly, with creaking wagons and much shouting and whip cracking, and though he was out of breath he had little trouble catching up with the last wagon.

Without a sound he grabbed the tailgate of the wagon, threw in his sack, and heaved himself aboard. He looked back once at the city, then covered his eyes, horrified. He didn't look back again.

❄

JACQUELINE M. SHANK retired from elementary teaching ten years ago, and has watched in awe as the time flies by. How can it have been that long? The small town where she now lives is full of interesting things to do; she misses the big city, the traffic, and the smog not at all. This is her third sale to Mrs. Bradley's splendid magazine, which encourages her to keep trying. Thank you, Mrs. B.

JAMES BALKOVEK is a native Californian and a graduate of California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. An illustrator of numerous children's and educational books, he has over twenty uears of illustration and design experience in commercial as well as editorial illustration.

The Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- 1st Place: **"Maiden Phoenix" by India Edghill**
- 2nd Place: **"Skerries" by Jon C. Crusoe**
- 3rd Place: **"The Oak King's Wrath" by Laura J. Underwood**

Artwork:

- 1st Place: **Vincent Di Fate for "Maiden Phoenix"**
- 2nd Place: **Kaja Foglio for "Opportunity Scratches"**
- 3rd Place: **Barb Armata for "Aisha Awakened"**

Congratulations to all the winners! To vote for your favorites in *this* issue, use the ballot on page 64.

Moving?

Your subscription copy of FANTASY Magazine will not be forwarded by the U.S. Post Office. If you don't send us a change of address notice, your issue will be delayed. We have even lost track of several subscribers entirely. Please send us a change of address as soon as you know it.

An Interview with
Vincent Di Fate
by Rachel E. Holmen

Vincent Di Fate is best-known as an artist of science-fictional hardware, but his first job after graduation from college, as an animator, had him making sure that Spiderman had appropriate musculature. He has illustrated a number of fantasy subjects as well.

MZBFM: *How long have you been doing science-fiction- and fantasy-related artwork?*

Di Fate: I've been doing it for a little over 28 years. I started illustrating in January of 1969.

That's such a precise date. How can you pinpoint it so exactly?

Well, my first client was *Analog*. I went to John W. Campbell the week before Christmas 1968 to show him my portfolio, and he gave me a manuscript, which I illustrated and returned with two weeks later, on the first work day in January.

Had you done amateur drawings before that?

I did unpaid stuff before that as a kid, sure. I also did some interiors that were pretty forgettable for *Galaxy* and *If* while I was an art student. But I mark the official beginning of my career as January of 1969 because of two things: I had hung up my shingle and determined that I was going to do nothing else *but* illustration, specifically science fiction and fantasy illustration; and secondly, the man who gave me that assignment was the illustrious John W. Campbell, who left an indelible impression on me.

Did you do most science fiction at first, or a mix of science fiction and fantasy?

I was drawn to the genre from my earliest memories. My first encounter with the genre was being taken to see ***ROCKETSHIP X-M*** back in 1950, in the early summer. From that I graduated to reading this stuff, which I found infinitely more interesting.

My mindset was that the fantastic was what I did, and illustration was merely the way in which I expressed it. To me, the literature, the ideas, were more important than being an artist in that traditional sense. So I decided, by choice, to specialize, and at the time that I entered the field, no one in his right mind wanted to specialize in science fiction illustration. So I got to do everything!

As a matter of fact, I believe around 1971 or 1972, I did virtually every horror book cover that was published. (Of course, there were only something like seven published. But I did 'em all.)

Once you had decided you wanted to specialize in the art of the fantastic, did this affect how you studied art?

Actually, let me backtrack on this. I never really deliberately set out to become an artist. I was one of those people who could sit down and draw anything that was in front of me, and a lot of things that weren't in front of me, had a good visual memory (and still do, to some extent), and was always the class artist; won all of the art competitions. But inasmuch as it was the only thing I could do without shooting myself in the foot, I grew to resent being an artist very early on in my life, and I said to myself, Pigs will fly before I ever become an artist.

You felt imposed on?

No, I felt that it wasn't all that there *was* to me. I felt there were other things I could do, I could write, I could... and I was actually very fond of the genre movies. Even though I realized that science fiction and fantasy literature, horror literature, are vastly different than the pop culture manifestations that appear on the motion picture screens, I really fell in love with the Universal horror films. And I fell in love with the early sf films, which were really just horror films masquerading as science fiction. James Arness in a carrot suit in ***THE THING*** was really basically Frankenstein's monster with a scientific rationale. Even though ***THE THING*** was drastically different than John Campbell's story "Who Goes There?", it captured the *mood*, and the ambiance, of the original story. The shapechanger aspect was enormously important to Campbell, and pivotal to that story, and also pivotal to the concept of the science fiction mystery story, where the reader actually gets a chance to participate and figure it out before he gets to the last word.

Being visually oriented, and also having story ideas, it was my mindset to actually work my way toward working in the film industry. The problem was that back when I graduated high school, there weren't a lot of film schools -- only two or three. There was NYU and USC and University of New Mexico and a few other places.

Photo by Beth Gwinn

And where had you grown up?

I grew up in the northeast. I have always lived in New York State, and I grew up in a small town in the shadow of Manhattan.

So going to one of the schools out west would have been problematic, but you could have gone to NYU.

Sure; in fact, I was accepted at NYU, I just couldn't afford to go. And I had been, dare I admit it, a truly *lousy* student. I was a smart guy but I was not particularly conscientious about doing homework; I had C's in high school, so there weren't schools beating a path to my door to offer me scholarships. My school counselor suggested I enter a scholarship competition being offered by an art school; he said, it'll look good on your record even if you don't go. I won a scholarship, and that's how I ended up in art school, because the fall came and I still had no doors opening for me. I did have a scholarship to go to art school, so I went to art school screaming and kicking.

What art school was this?

It no longer exists, but it was called the New York Phoenix School of Design. All the other art school students would laugh at me because I went to this really rinkydink academic school, but at the end of four years I knew how to draw and paint and they didn't.

So it was very much focussed on the graphic arts.

Yes, I studied illustration for four years. I mastered my skills in the avoidance of work; I did as little as I could; I am a profoundly lazy human being, and I will tell you that without equivocation. I manage to get things done, and I actually never miss deadlines, as I'm sure you know, and I do have a work ethic mentality. But the fact is that I hated art school; it was like having a root canal every day of the week, and it was just too much for me.

It sounds like the school's lack of prestige was a problem.

It *did* have prestige; what is wasn't was a sexy school. The guys who were going to school at Visual Arts back in the early sixties learned all of the flashy techniques, and they worked for about three years after they got out of art school, and then when the styles changed they had inadequate education. They couldn't draw, they couldn't paint. I had a kind of high-button-shoe traditional education, and learned the craft, so I was lucky that I happened to go to the right art school.

At any rate, even when I got out of art school, I still was not interested in becoming an illustrator; my first real job out of art school was as an animator; I worked on a weekly TV series called *Spiderman*. We played on Saturday mornings on ABC, and our director was a fellow called Ralph Bakshi who is sort of semi-well-known in animation circles for having done the animated film version of ***FRITZ THE CAT***, the first X-rated feature-length cartoon. He did that abominable animated version of ***LORD OF THE RINGS*** back in the 80s. Our producer was Steve Krantz, married to Judith Krantz, the bestselling novelist. He himself has had a couple of books on the bestseller list, and produced both live-action and animated films.

I was originally hired by the background department, and was painting trees, and Nash fences [*a type of chain-link fence — ed.*], and really interesting stuff like that, and then they found out that I could draw, so they shifted me over to the animation department and made me what they call an in-betweener. The animator does the start-motion and the stop-motion for any particular scene; you know, Floyd the Carrot scratches his head. The animator would draw Floyd the Carrot standing there with his arms at rest, and then show the end movement, and he would calculate the number of frames that it would take. If it was supposed to be an abrupt movement, it would be fewer frames, fewer drawings, and so the in-betweener was told the number of frames, and he would have to draw those positions.

But my *real* function was that I knew how to draw people. Our show was really made up of mostly free-lance animators: guys who used to work at the old Terrytoons in New Rochelle, in Westchester County [just north of New York City]. Mighty Mouse was their most famous character, and they also did Heckle and Jeckle — the *giants* of the animation industry — and these were basically sausage-type animations; as long as you could draw a circle, or a cone, or a sausage-shape, you could draw those characters, and all of our animators had really worked their entire careers doing those kind of funny sausage-shaped things. And here

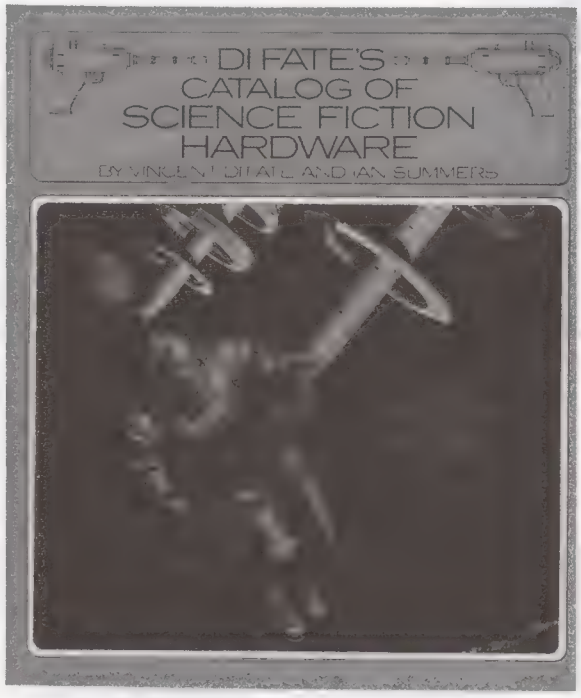
All artwork by Vincent Di Fate

we had Spiderman, who actually had human musculature. So my job was to take all of the diverse animation drawings — we had about five free-lance animators working on the show — make 'em look like they were all drawn by the same hand, and to make the anatomy look like it was human! So I had my job cut out for me.

But just under six months after I was hired, the New York Times just *bashed* our show in a Sunday editorial for the level of violence on the show, and Monday morning we were cancelled. And that was just before Thanksgiving of 1968. I was the first one terminated, because I was the only non-union member; that's how I know it was six months, because I was just a couple of weeks away from getting my union card. Between the week before Thanksgiving and the week before Christmas, I frantically pulled together a portfolio and started schlepping it around, and the first person I went to see was John Campbell. And he said, "You have possibilities."

So he was his own art director?

Actually, he *had* an art director, Herb Stoltz. John Campbell had enormous input, he had control over the entire magazine, really. He farmed out the art assignments to the artists, so he decided on the basis of the kind of work you did, whether or not you got a particular kind of story. So Kelly Freas was getting all the Randall Garrett stuff, and I was getting the Keith Laumer stuff.



Did you illustrate any of Laumer's Retief stories? I'm very fond of those. The character was kind of a Dilbert of his era.

Actually, I've done Retief, but not for *Analog*. I did mostly the Bolo stories when they were first published, which almost became a specialty for me for a while. The first cover I did for *Analog* was a story called "Gottlos", written not by Keith Laumer but by Colin Kapp, and it was about a sentient tank.

So you were quickly typecast doing hardware for science fiction magazines.

For the magazines, yes, but for the paperback field and for magazines outside the science fiction genre, I did a fairly mixed bag, a lot of figurative stuff, too, because my training was in figure painting. But the first several dozen covers that I got, where they wanted me to do spaceships, I did a truly awful job of them. It took me a while to figure out how to do them. But once I figured out how to do them — it wasn't a couple of dozen, but three or four before I got the hang of it — I became forever cursed for being good at a particular kind of thing. So I've done hardware virtually at the exclusion of other kinds of subjects. But I prefer to do a lot of different things.

When I worked at Locus, *Charles Brown reported that you were unhappy that you weren't getting more assignments where you could draw people. I remembered that when I started here, and you've done several covers and many interiors for us. We've been really blessed to have your skills.*

Why, thank you much. It's funny, though, how you get typecast, because the stereotypical gadget painter is not competent to do figures in many instances. Chesley Bonestell, who was the most magnificent of all astronomical painters, painted people like... like they had no internal bone structure. It was really quite remarkable. But when it came to painting a rock, boy, that sonofabitch could paint!

Have you done astronomical paintings?

Yes, as a matter of fact, I did seven for a National Geographic book called **OUR UNIVERSE**, and have done other astronomicals, largely on spec. I have almost always sold them right away.

Because they are relatively generic, you can get an awful lot of yardage out of an astronomical painting. I love doing them. I have been commissioned to do proposals for astronomical murals, and have done some fairly complete comps, usually in a 1-inch to 1-foot ratio. I'm actually doing a children's astronomy book now, for Scholastic.

Now you did a book a year or two ago about movie posters.

No, I actually didn't. I've written a couple of articles on the subject. Hey, I really am a maven about old genre films. But, as much of a maven as I am about the really good science fiction movies, I have a profound love for the truly brain-dead science fiction movies.

I think many people do.

Let me tell you. When it comes to people like Paul Blaisdell, who did all of those critters for those low-budget Roger Corman films, he could really push my buttons. I will never forget seeing the fearsome handpuppet creature in ***THE BEAST WITH ONE MILLION EYES***. It was a truly remarkable work of art.

I've written several articles on the subject of movie posters and movie poster artists, and I find them an intriguing subject, because they're really kind of a mirror of what the fifties were about.

There was a wonderful museum exhibit in Oakland some years ago called "What the Future Was" and it was full of Buck Rogers paraphernalia and designs of futuristic homes. This was what people thought, in the forties and fifties, that the future was going to be, and now that we're ***in*** *"the future" we can look at all this stuff and laugh.*

And that's certainly what sf is about. And as a matter of fact, there is a show opening in Seattle this month — you know, Seattle is the home of UFOs — the famous Kenneth Arnold sighting on June 24, 1947 — now fifty years ago, the first UFO sighting to get national exposure in the newspapers. The folks at the Center of Contemporary Art are doing a show on flying saucers and their influence on American popular culture — UFO toys and food; you remember the famous Carvel flying saucer ice cream things?

No. I guess that didn't get to California, where I was living.

But it's interesting how these wacky ideas influenced us. You talk to any car buff, and they'll tell you about Harle Earle

and all the great automotive designers of the 1950s, and basically what they were building or designing were spaceships on wheels. They all looked like V2 rockets.

Once you got typecast doing hardware, did your career have any particular movement back toward fantasy?

Actually, I still believe that I am perceived as a hardware artist. I think you're probably the only people for whom I actually do fantasy artwork on a regular basis, and I think that a lot of it has to do with the perception that I do spaceships. But I can see that changing over time. For one thing, I am doing things to deliberately move, not necessarily away from gadget art, but to diversify. And one of the things that I hope to be doing is generating artwork as samples, such as our recent discussion of my doing a dragon painting that might eventually be a cover.

I was going to ask if you've done what I would call "critters": dragons, werewolves, unicorns...

Yes.

On spec, or as professional covers or interiors?

Yes. <laughter>

I simply haven't been terribly active in trying to solicit my work in the fantasy market. At my stage in the game, I'm actually a pretty busy guy. And there isn't really enough time to do everything that I want to do.

I should also say, to counteract what I said earlier on, that I have since grown to accept that I am an illustrator. I always work diligently, I always put in my very best effort with everything that I did, but there wasn't a conviction that this was the end-all and be-all of what I was going to do for my entire life. It took my becoming actively involved in the Society of Illustrators to really appreciate illustration in a broader sense and to finally get to admit to myself that I had been loving what I had been doing all along, and that if I had really wanted to do something else, I would have done it.

But I was almost forty when I said, "Hey, you know, I think I like doing this." I always enjoyed the assignments, but making pictures is the most difficult thing that I've ever done in my entire life. And even if drawing came easy to me, when I started doing it professionally, I would spend an inordinate amount of time punishing myself. People who don't work in the arts don't really realize the pain aspect of working in the arts, whether self-imposed or imposed by external forces.

I think there's enormous criticism and nonacceptance both of a specific piece: you know, "you didn't draw this the way I imagined it and therefore it's wrong;" and people going, "why don't you get a real job?"

I also think, too, that as we become a much more rational culture, as our science expands, as we learn more about who we are and what the hell we're doing here, there's actually a greater need for mythology, I really believe that the current high level of interest in the fantastic — whether it be science fiction or fantasy or horror —

And the related "angel trend".

I think that's related to the millenium...but still I think there is, more than at any other time in history, a need for us to develop a new mythology.

I think people want to believe in some kind of magic. We want to think there are easier answers.

And we *need* to think that there are.

And also there's some kind of search for meaning going on there.

It's critically important to have a purpose, beyond feeding yourself and gettin' through the day.

You've managed to raise a family and support a wife...or is she having to support you?

She does work — she teaches at Vassar College — but no, I've actually been able to send my kids through college, and do all of the appropriate things that a parent does, without getting locked up or thrown into debtor's prison.

That's fortunate, because I think a lot of people who love art desperately, cannot make a living at it.

Yes, you are absolutely right, and I am enormously fortunate. That's one of the things that I lull myself to sleep with at night when I'm thinking that the world has trashed me, or if I've done a really lousy painting after investing many, many hours into trying to make it work, and I just feel everything in the world is wrong.

INFINITE WORLDS: THE FANTASTIC VISIONS OF SCIENCE FICTION ART, by Vincent Di Fate with a foreword by Ray Bradbury, Penguin Studio 0-670-87252-0, 320 pp., 600 color and 75 b&w plates, hc, $40.00, October 1997.

You know, I put in a great deal of earnest effort in all those years, and I suffered mightily for my art, and yet I couldn't give myself the luxury of accepting that this is what I was about. And I used to spend an inordinate amount of time just punishing myself in the studio, which is why I lead such a busy life these days. I teach one day a week, and I am President of the Society of Illustrators, which is an enormously time-consuming thing; I wrote that book on science fiction art, it's the first of a series of books that I'm now writing; and I still keep a fairly full calendar of illustration assignments, and I do all of this so that I don't concentrate on one thing. It's like, if you stub your toe and it hurts, and if you have nothing else preoccupying you, it becomes the greatest pain in the universe, until you hit your head on the shelf, and then you've got a bigger pain. And that's sort of how I feel about how my life works. If I'm diversified enough, and doing enough things, then my concentration doesn't fill the vacuum on one particular thing and I'm not actively involved in punishing my-

self entirely. It becomes concentration on the creative effort, too little time for the luxury of self-punishment, and then I go on to the next thing. I find that's actually working pretty well for me.

I'd like to think it was more positive.

It *is* a positive thing; it's being able to live with your affliction. It's like being a werewolf, and being able to control yourself enough so that don't go biting people on the neck.

Tell me more about the art book you mentioned.

The book will be coming out from Penguin Studio Books, in October. There will be bound copies available probably as early as August, so I expect to probably bring a few copies to the WorldCon with me. The book runs 320 pages; it contains over 700 images, most of them in color; and it is a history of science fiction illustration, mostly focussed on American science fiction illustration, so it's not an absolute complete definitive history. But given its relatively narrow focus — it's science fiction art only at this point — and it's largely *American* science fiction art (I do deal with some of the important European artists who illustrated science fiction before it became the popular American pastime) — it spans that period from roughly the mid-1800s to the present. It's divided into two sections, a historical survey which contains the history and a picture survey of the evolution of science fiction art; and then a gallery section where 130 artists are profiled.

Contemporary artists? Or historical?

Both. So every artist who's mentioned in the historical text (with a few exceptions) will also be in the gallery section. Anyway, that's the nature of the book. It's actually the first of three proposed books; one will be on fantasy and one will be on supernatural horror. The enthusiasm with which Viking Penguin has embraced the first book has led to my negotiating with them to do a series of fictional works that I'll be writing and illustrating myself.

So it looks like I'm going to be busy for quite a while.

We'll be looking forward to the survey of fantasy art, since its history goes back as far as the history of art goes.

Yes, in fact that's why I'm taking what I prefer to call "small bites" so there will be very specific focuses so that these don't get out of hand. The fact is that horror stories and fantasy stories have been with us since the very dawn of time, and to do any kind of adequate history will be prohibitively complex and extensive, so you have to really fine-focus this. So I'm gonna deal probably, at least initially, on the American literary markets and the visual connection to those markets. But eventually I'd love to do books on, for instance, the aspects of, say, horror or fantasy, on motion picture design — set design and character design and so forth. I think these could be enormously exciting topics to deal with in depth. And a lot of them haven't been done yet. As I say, I've got quite a bit of terrain mapped out for myself, as well as these fictional works that I'm embarking on.

Tell us a little more about those — that sounds interesting.

I knew when I started writing about science fiction art that I wasn't a skilled writer; I knew I was just some guy who knew the subject matter. Because I work at it professionally, I think my knowledge of the subject is in many ways is unique... I mean, most of the people who write about science fiction art are not artists. So I had a unique perspective, and knew virtually all of my idols, with the notable exception of Chesley Bonestell, personally. And I had Chesley's number for many years, and I never called him.

He was on the West Coast; he was in Monterey for many years.

I had his number and I never called him. I knew he was easy to talk to, and I utterly idolized him, I thought his work was just absolutely great. But I knew everybody else, I knew Dick Powers really well, and I loved Dick. I think he was one of the geniuses of American science fiction art. And people like Paul Lehr and John Schoenherr have been good friends of mine for all of my professional life. And Stanley Meltzoff did enormously important works very early on in the early 1950s for the paperback market, and Robert Emil Schulz, and so forth; enormously talented people, all of whom I've known.

You are uniquely situated to write this book for Penguin.

You know, I've been writing a regular column in *Science Fiction Chronicle*, so I'd pretty much written the history before this book prospect materialized, and it seemed like a natural choice. In writing the factual stuff, it was really mainly an issue of having good information to impart, and I didn't worry too much about style, and because I was primarily focussed on being an illustrator, if I wrote something badly, I didn't worry about it a whole lot; it wasn't what I was about.

And since I knew I wasn't a literary virtuoso...

But you're a very articulate person.

What happened was, as I was writing the text for the book, the editor-in-chief at Viking/Penguin would call me up and say, "What other ideas do you have?" so he obviously liked the way it was coming out. I got into a conversation with him, dare I say it, about UFOs, and I had this wacky idea for a book, and that evolved into something else, into wholly a work of fiction. I'm writing a full-blown sf novel with pictures. I said to the editor, what if [the UFO sighting at] Roswell were real? I don't believe that anything happened in the deserts of Roswell, New Mexico; I think this was a balloon. But wouldn't it be great if it were a real thing, and we had the diagrams, and we had the autopsy sketches and we knew what these guys looked like and we could figure out why they were here and what they were all about? And the editor said, "Yes, it sounds great," so we went to see the publisher and he was intrigued by it.

What advice do you have for somebody starting out as an artist who would like a career like the one you got dragged into, kicking and screaming?

The best advice that I can give anyone with aspirations of becoming an artist of the fantastic is to really read the genre.

Photo by Charles N. Brown

Vincent Di Fate in the MagiCon art show

The majority of students that I have who enroll in my class — I teach a course called Science Fiction Art at the Fashion Institute of Technology which is part of State University of New York... It's gotten to be a very popular class. In fact, normally students get hooked on the class and repeat it to build a portfolio.

So the students have drawing time in this class as well as lecture time?

Right. It's a hands-on studio class. We do three assignments each semester: one fantasy, one supernatural horror, and one science fiction. And we talk about the relative aspects of those genres and I give them specific assignments. I give them a story to illustrate, usually with some limitation, either to a particular color, or to a particular shape, or it might be a story that has an appealing punchline to it and I'll impress upon them that they can't give away the ending.

When students come into the class, many of them don't read in the genre. Their mindset about the fantastic is only what they know from the movies — like getting 25 drawings of Mr. Spock from all 25 students. That's their idea of what an alien is. So I'll bring in guest speakers — I've had Wayne Barlowe come in, for instance, and Wayne has a whole philosophy about the relationship of the environment to the physiology of the critter — and in the space of a two hour lecture, they'll walk away suddenly looking at things with different eyes.

I've introduced concepts like time travel; we'll talk about the mathematics, we'll talk about the third law of thermodynamics and parallel realities and so forth, to get them thinking about this being a literature of ideas.

For instance, John Campbell at *Analog* gave me an assignment with a centauroid alien. And we all know what the traditional centaur looks like. The first question he asked was, so you've got a human torso, you've got a horse's torso; where are the lungs? Or do they have two sets of lungs? And if so, what's the rationale?

So what I'll do is I'll get them to think about what it is that they're doing. If I've given them a fantasy story, I'll tell them, I don't want a traditional solution to this. There's a marvelous vampire story called "To See Him Smile", and the minute they hear that there's going to be a vampire story they're immediately thinking of guys running around with black capes with their hair slicked back, like Bela Lugosi, and speaking with an accent that could shatter concrete at fifty feet. And that's not what the story's about. The story's about this guy who at least externally appears to be a homeless person, who's been haunting a building for a hundred fifty years. They have to solve that problem without giving away the ending, because the ending is that this creature has multiple mouths. So how do they do it?

The remarkable thing is that they all have a different idea of how to solve the problem. It's getting them to face the problem, to accept the challenge.

And that's just it. You know, giving people traditional solutions is not good creative fantastic picture-making. I remember the very first assignment that you gave me involved my drawing a dragon. And you told me you had never seen a dragon like that before. And that's because I don't know how to draw a dragon.

<laughter>

I just know that I loved it, which is why I bought it from you.

So that's really part of my thing, is to not *do* the traditional. Sometimes there are no alternatives, sometimes you really have to put horns on the devil or fur on the werewolf or whatever...

Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

There are things that are code for "this is what kind of character this is", and sometimes you have to use that code.

Early on in my relationship with John Campbell, he gave me a story where the viewpoint character is not human. And you don't find out until the very last page of the story, and that's always a great challenge, because you bring in a certain number of assumptions to a story. Unless there's a specific reference to gender, for instance, most males read stories thinking the protagonist is a male. If you read a story that's being told by a critter that's nothing like a human being, it is quite unnerving if you don't really come to that realization until the last page. And that's what gave me a whole different perspective about the fantastic. That even when you're talking about traditional characters, traditional critters — fairies, for instance — they could be *anything*. There's no union that makes them all dress alike. They don't have union cards, and they don't have a secret handshake.

I hope that's what makes drawing fantastical creatures a fun challenge for artists.

Yes. It should always be interesting. When it becomes drudgery — I'm not saying that you shouldn't punish yourself in the process because that's an artist thing anyway, if you're not feeling pain then you're not doing the job — but it should always be challenging.

Thank you very much for your time.

❄

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A Slow Day in Hell

by Julia S. Mandala

Satan, Prince of Darkness and Lord of All Evil, sipped a frozen margarita and stared out the window of his air-conditioned office at the writhing, moaning masses in the fiery pits below. Not that Satan cared a jot for temperature. Nor did he particularly like margaritas. He preferred a nice, woody Chardonnay, but no beverage aroused howling misery quite like a frosty frozen drink. On slow days, he was forced to resort to these petty tortures until something better occurred to him.

Screeching fingernails clawed the office door. Satan turned from his tormenting and called, "Come in, Meph." No one but Mephistopheles could achieve that particular grating noise — one that made skin crawl, ears cringe and hairs stand on end.

Mephistopheles, Greatest of Demons and Satan's Left-Hand Man, ushered in a short, pudgy imp, who cowered in flatteringly appropriate fear and awe. "I have brought Cyril, O Evil One," said Mephistopheles, winking at Satan over the imp's head.

"Leave us, then."

Cyril's face showed utter panic at the prospect of being left alone with the Lord of All Evil.

Mephistopheles gave him a pitying look. "Ah, well," he sighed, leaving the imp to his fate.

Satan fixed fiery red eyes on the tiny imp and waited. Cyril's shaking worsened. He began to blubber and drool. He wrung his claws, carelessly slicing through his leathery hide. Still, Satan said nothing, but continued to pin Cyril with his gaze. Finally, the imp could take it no longer.

"Pleeeeeze, your worship, forgive my clumsiness," he sobbed, collapsing to the floor in a quivering mass. "How was I to know the man enjoyed being beaten?"

"His bio materials clearly stated he

Artwork by Barb Armata

was a masochist," said Satan. "Didn't you read them?"

"I thought that meant he went to Catholic Church," sniffled Cyril.

The Prince of Darkness waved his arm dismissively. "I ought to consign you to the common pit."

"Noooooo! Not the pit! You know what the masses do to imps who are stripped of their powers."

"All the vile, evil, horrible things you did to them, I suppose," Satan said in a bored tone.

"Please, O Great Evil One, give Cyril another chance," the imp begged. "Cyril can be evil. Cyril can cause great misery. Yes. Yes, he can."

Satan despised those who spoke of themselves in the third person and was sorely tempted to cast Cyril into the pit and be done with it. But ... it was a slow afternoon. "Very well. I have a borderline case for you. Break her spirit and she will be consigned to the pits in your place."

"Oh, thank you, thank you." Cyril grabbed Satan's sleeve and kissed it in gratitude.

The Lord of All Evil was less than moved by the gesture. Cyril's drool left stains on the fine material. "Get on with it!" Satan shook the imp off with such force that Cyril crashed through the door with a splintering bang, leaving behind an imp-shaped hole.

"Sorry!" came Cyril's voice.

What a pickle I've gotten myself into, thought the imp as he waddled on stubby legs along the rutted, dusty path. It didn't have to be a dusty path. Oh no. Hell was limited only by the vision of the imps and demons inhabiting it. But therein lay the problem. No one could say Cyril wasn't an enthusiastic imp; he delighted in inflicting pain and misery as much as anyone in Hell. But even Cyril had finally come to realize he was slow of reasoning and limited in imagination.

"I'll show them this time," he vowed, swiping his keycard through the security access scanner that opened the holding area gate. "I'll make this woman shriek and howl in despair." But how?

The file the bored receptionist handed him was labeled "Marjorie Mornington." A glance through the material showed little. Housewife. Died in a fire. An optimist? He wondered why they bothered to mentioned it. Near-sightedness and other physical deformities vanished after death.

Cyril opened the door to the holding area. Seated on the molded plastic bench, straight-backed, ankles crossed, Marjorie Mornington looked like anybody's middle-aged mother — immaculately coiffed hair dyed an artificial dark brown, bright blue duster dotted with cheery yellow daisies masking her plumpness, and blue terry house slippers that just matched her eyes. Cyril rubbed his hands and licked his cracked lips. Easy pickings.

"Mornington!" he barked, though only she and he graced the room.

Marjorie waved and smiled. "Here I am!"

He gave her his most ominous glare. "I am Cyril, your worst nightmare."

"Aren't you the cutest little thing!" She patted him on his remaining tuft of hair, which sprouted from the center of his forehead. "Is this Hell?" Without waiting for an answer or his instruction, she stepped out of Receiving and into Hell Proper. "My, it's nice and warm here. I can't tolerate the cold. I used to beg Bob (that's my husband) to turn up the heat in the winter, but he would just grumble about the gas bill and ignore me." She stretched luxuriantly and sighed. "That's what brought me here in the end."

She giggled — not a hideous, disgusting imp giggle, but the pleasant, childlike giggle of one who has done a naughty thing and been caught by an indulgent parent. "This winter was particularly cold and in late February, I just snapped. I asked Bob one last time to turn up the heat. That's what I said. 'Bob, for the last time, please turn up the darned heat.' I figured when I *swore* like that, he'd know I meant business. But he just kept reading his paper and muttered, 'I'm glad it's the last time.' Well, he wasn't so glad after I blew out the pilot light, waited a few minutes and struck a match." She sighed again. "The blaze was so nice and warm."

Cyril scratched his head, forgetting until too late that his claws would rake bloody furrows into his scalp. This was going to be harder than he'd thought. Ideally, her personal hell should be colder than Antarctica in the dead of winter. But there hadn't been a Cold Day in Hell for centuries, and Cyril didn't have the faintest idea how to bring about another one, let alone an eternity of Cold Days. He racked his meager brain cells. What did sweet, middle-aged ladies hate? Cyril got an impish grin on his impish face.

"Come with me," he said in a sticky-sweet voice. "I have just the place where you'll feel comfortable."

They meandered through the corridors of Hell, Marjorie chattering all the way, until they reached the door Cyril was searching for. He opened it with a grand, sweeping gesture, his eyes glued to Marjorie so he could get a good look at the horror on her face.

"Oooh!" she squealed. But instead of shrinking in fear, she lit up with delight. "Cute, fuzzy mice."

"They're *rats*!"

"Well, so they are." She squatted and reached out to one of the rodents. "Come here, little fellah. Don't be afraid."

To Cyril's surprise, the creature did not snap off a finger. It cautiously sniffed at Marjorie, then nuzzled her hand like a kitten. Cooing and smiling, she stroked its fur. "My father always said I'd make a pet out of anything. These little guys remind me of the bats I kept as a girl. They lived in our barn, and —"

"Out!" ordered Cyril.

"But I thought you said —"

"Out!"

Marjorie gave the rodent one final pat, then reluctantly rose to follow the imp. Cyril set his brain to churning again. Creatures were out. What, then? Suddenly, he got a Sly Idea.

"Now, you've already told me you hate the cold," he said solicitously. "Is there anything else that really gets to you? I mean, we wouldn't want to put you someplace where you'd be unhappy."

"Oh, I'm sure whatever you choose will be fine with me."

"Come on," cajoled Cyril. "There must be something."

"Well," Marjorie confided, "I'm not very fond of heights."

Aha! Cyril led the way, strutting with confidence that victory was near and an eternity of torture in the pits avoided. When they reached their next destination, he flung open the door and shoved a surprised Marjorie into the waiting arms of two demons. One restrained her while the other strapped a harness over her blue and yellow duster. Bungee cords dangled ominously from the back.

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed in dismay. Her face froze into a pleasing mask of horror as she peered over the edge of a platform into a seemingly bottomless pit.

"Cyril?" She stared in shock at his betrayal.

The two demons exchanged demonic grins. "Did you remember to shorten the cords?" asked one. "I don't want to clean up another smashed body."

"Oops, I forgot," said the other, simultaneously giving Marjorie a hard shove.

She stumbled off the platform and plunged toward the darkness. Bungee cords whipped from their coils. "My wooorrr —" Her voice faded. Half an hour later, the last of the cord unwound. The two bands stretched tight, paused, then began bunching together again. Cyril wriggled in anticipation of Marjorie's blood-curdling screams on her journey up. He caught her voice, faint, but growing louder and louder. Instead of curdling, his blood froze. It couldn't be!

"Wheeee!" shouted Marjorie as she flew upward.

"Hey, imp," snarled one demon while the other rolled in the bungee cords. "What are you doing bringing us someone who *likes* to bungee jump?"

"But she said —" Cyril clamped his mouth shut before he said something he might regret. It never paid to piss off a demon.

"Whew!" gasped Marjorie. The demons roughly tore off the bungee harness and thrust them both out the door. She put her hands on her hips. "I ought to be mad as heck about that trick you played on me, but it worked. I'm completely cured of my fear of heights. Thank you!" She leaned down and gathered Cyril into a big hug.

His blood boiled inside his impish breast. Jerking away, Cyril tugged on his tuft and hopped from foot to foot, height increasing until he was bouncing off the ceiling and walls.

"My word," said Marjorie, clapping her hands in delighted rhythm. "What an interesting little dance. Could you teach me the steps? I want to fit in down here —"

"No!"

"Then I'll teach you a dance I know. Do-do-do-di-do-di-do- do-do, do-do-do-di-do-di-do-do-do."

Cyril watched in stunned fury as Marjorie Mornington began to disco, sing-songing an insipid seventies melody all the while. "C'mon, Cyril. Don't be a stick in the mud. Do the Hustle! Do-do-do-di-do-di-do-do-do, do-do-do-di- do-di-do-do-do."

Seething, he scratched "Boogie Wonderland" from his list of places to try on Marjorie. In Boogie Wonderland, the damned — usually aficionados of rock-and-roll or classical music — danced to an endless stream of disco songs, cleverly mixed by Hell's finest D.J. so that it was impossible to tell where one song ended and the next began and no one ever got a chance to leave the dance floor. The pounding beat drowned out the wailing of "Disco sucks!" and the gnashing of teeth as tortured souls boogied for all eternity to the stylings of Donna Summer and the Bee Gees.

With moves that would make Travolta proud, Marjorie added the pointing fingers to her routine. "Aaargh!" wailed Cyril, yanking at his tuft again. His eyes widened in horrified disbelief as his fist came away with his last surviving strands of hair.

"Oooh! If you weren't already dead, I'd kill you!"

"Lighten up, Cyril. Do-do-do-di-do-di-do-do-do." Marjorie's plump hips swayed in perfect rhythm.

"NO DANCING!"

"Oh, all right." As suddenly as she had begun, she stopped. "My, that was fun. I haven't danced in years. Bob had two left feet. You know, I'll bet they don't disco in Heaven. You're making me glad I ended up down here."

Steam poured from the imp's ears.

"What a neat trick," said Marjorie. "I wonder if I can do that." She screwed shut her eyes, face set in deep concentration. Steam trickled from her ears. Then, the trickle became a torrent. Then, steam turned to flames.

"H-how'd you do that?" Marjorie opened her innocent blue eyes. "I'm not sure. But it *does* feel good to blow off steam, doesn't it?"

Cyril was beginning to suspect if he locked Marjorie Mornington in a room full of manure and gave her a shovel, she would find a pony.

"What's next?" she asked. "Though I suppose it's rude of me to assume you'll keep being so nice about showing me around and getting me settled in. I'll bet you have all kinds of things you need to be doing."

"Oh, no," he said with a hysterical edge like broken glass. "This is what I do. I'm an official greeter."

Artwork by Barb Armata

"Just like those elderly people at Wal-Mart," Marjorie said. "You know, Hell's a much friendlier place than they lead you to believe down at the Baptist Church."

Cyril began to giggle uncontrollably — not a pleasant, childlike giggle, or even a hideous, disgusting imp giggle. It was the crazed giggle of someone who finally got the joke and realized it was a particularly cruel and nasty joke and that the joke was on him.

Marjorie beamed benevolently at him. "That's better, Cyril. You're learning to relax."

"Hee-hee! Hoo-hoo!" he giggled, rocking from side to side, drool spilling from the corners of his mouth, tears spilling from the corners of his eyes. Cyril was still hee-heeing and hoo- hooing when the demons dragged him off to the pit.

"My word," Marjorie said to the two new imps that flanked her. "He was an odd little fellow."

The imp guards glowered and motioned for her to walk between them. They soon arrived at the office of the Big Boss. A new door gleamed in the red firelight.

"Now you'll find out what Hell's really all about," growled one.

"Another tour?" asked Marjorie. "Splendid. I love seeing new sights. Bob never liked to go anywhere."

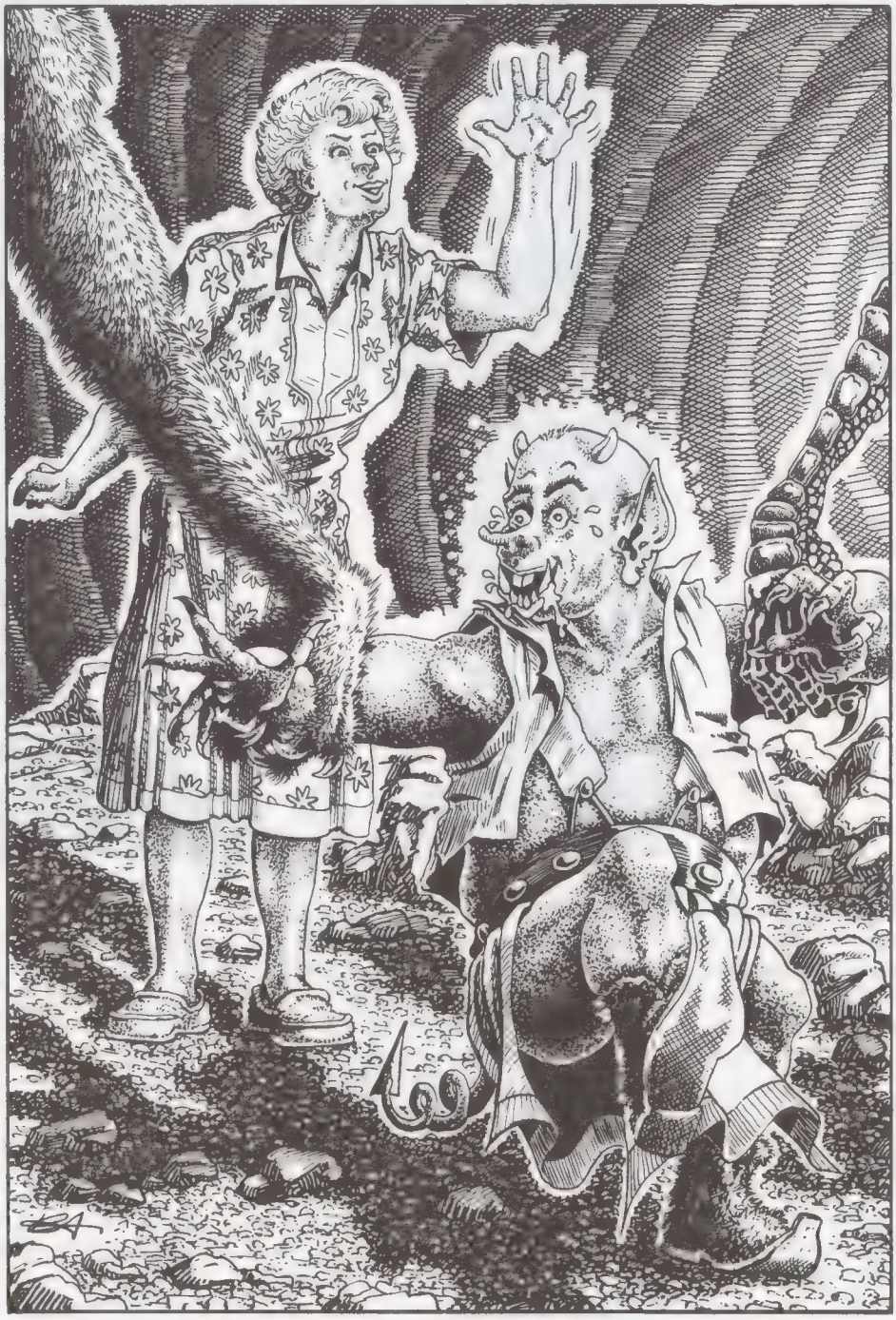
The imp snorted and knocked. "ENTER!" a deep voice called.

The imps opened the door, thrust Marjorie through, and pulled it shut behind her with a thud. Satan, Prince of Darkness and Lord of All Evil, regarded her with flaming eyes. "Well, Ms. Mornington, you've had quite a first day in Hell." He grinned satanically as Marjorie's face melted and ran together. Her body shifted and flowed until she was a nauseating mass of moving flesh. Gradually, all the parts settled into the form of Mephistopheles.

Satan clapped him on the back. "Meph, you're a genius. You sure know how to liven up a dull day."

Mephistopheles bowed his head modestly and poured a couple of margaritas. Staring in satisfaction out the plate glass window at the tormented souls languishing in the pit, they finally spotted Cyril. The imp alternatively giggled hysterically and writhed in agony as those he had tormented took their revenge. Satan and his minion exchanged a high five. The Lord of All Evil's laughter boomed across the vast expanse of Hell. "Is this a great job or what?"

❄



Artwork by Barb Armata

Julia S. Mandala is a Kansas City native transplanted to Plano, Texas after an eight-year layover in New Orleans, Louisiana. She received a bachelor of arts in history from Kansas State University and a law degree from Tulane. She has wanted to be a writer for as long as she can remember. After an eight-year stint as a labor attorney, she is now a full-time writer and has just completed her first fantasy novel.

Barb Armata has lurked on the edges of the sf-fantasy art world for many years, and lives in the Northeast. She has illustrated for many publications, most frequently for these pages. Her paintings have been displayed at both World Science Fiction and World Fantasy art shows, and can be found on numerous collectable card game cards. She hopes to return to the art show circuit soon.

Lesson in Smoke

by Juli Lynn Gioia

I planned carefully, waiting until the head baker and all the other girls were out of the bakery's main kitchen. Marlee was bent over her bowl, her seemingly undivided attention focused on properly creaming equal amounts of butter and sugar for a new fruit pastry recipe.

It was time.

A deft flick of my wrist was all it took. As I'd hoped, the glob of cake batter connected squarely with Marlee's nose. I ducked quickly, prepared for the mock swordfight which was sure to follow.

Nothing happened.

I peeked over the counter, expecting a sharp thwack to my noggin at any second.

But Marlee wasn't brandishing her wooden spoon at me, or preparing to launch any gooey projectiles. She sat on her stool,staring straight ahead. Her eyes were threatening to overflow, and her lower lip quivered. Her beautiful face was pinched and strained.

Marlee and I were best friends, and had been since we were two. We grew up together. And in the twenty-three years I'd known her, I'd never seen her cry.

Forgetting the battle I'd been hoping for, I rushed around the counter, took the bowl from Marlee's lap, and grasped her shoulders, forcing her to look at me.

"Marlee, what's wrong?"

Her whisper was so low, I almost didn't hear it. "I'm pregnant."

My heart skipped a beat, and I couldn't speak for a moment. "But, Marlee, that's wonderful! Bryant will be thrilled! You haven't told him yet, have you? Oh, Marlee, all these months of trying, and finally! When ..." I stopped. Marlee's threatened tears had become reality and small sobs were shaking her, though she didn't make a sound.

"Marlee, I don't understand. I thought you and Bryant wanted a child."

Marlee gulped hard and held her breath for a moment. When she exhaled, she seemed to have gotten hold of herself.

"Bryant wasn't home last night, so I burned birthwort and bloodnettle to see how the pregnancy and birth would be." Her voice began to quiver, and she clamped her jaw tight and held her breath again.

Of course she'd waited until her hus-

Artwork by Allison Hershey

band wasn't home. Herb-magic, being derived from plants, is closely tied into the ebb and flow of a woman's cycle. A man, with his stagnant, unchanging body, will sour herb-spells with his very proximity.

"Sarla, the spell ..." Marlee stopped, unable to continue.

My heart sank. Although we had both had training as young girls, I'd never mastered the basic herb-spells the way Marlee had. In fact, my skill was so poor, I'd been very surprised that the herb-mage, Nora, had kept me on for the full year of training required of young women. My spells always went awry — when they worked at all — but Marlee's always worked properly.

"Something's wrong, isn't it?" My mind flew through all the possible complications. I didn't want to say anything aloud, the superstitious part of me scared I would jinx the baby, but I had to know. "What is it Marlee?" I tried to speak gently. "A birth defect? A bad labor?"

Marlee shook her head. "No, not that. There was just this, this sense of physical danger, like I got before Bryant was attacked by that brigand on his way to Hilltown. And then, I saw —" Marlee gulped again, hard, then whispered, "I saw Nora's face in the smoke, Sarla."

"Nora? The herb-mage? That doesn't make sense, Marlee. Nora would never hurt your baby. Nora loves you and Bryant! You must have done the spell wrong."

"That's what I thought! I did the spell five times, Sarla, *five times*, and it turned out the same every time! You know I'm right. I've never messed up a spell, not even once."

It was true. Marlee had been so good, she'd quickly become the herb-mage's favorite student. Nora had taught Marlee well, and her herb-spells never missed. So Marlee's spell was true. It made absolutely no sense.

Marlee was trembling. We needed to get to the bottom of this fast, or Marlee's emotional state would hurt the baby, even if nothing else did.

"Get your cloak, Marlee. We're going to visit Nora."

I told the owner of the bakery that Marlee was sick and I was taking her to the herb-mage. One look at Marlee's blotchy face and trembling hands convinced her, and we were on our way.

It was a bright, crisp spring morning, but the bout of spring fever which had made me feel like a playful adolescent had drained away, leaving me anxious and strained. The beauty of fresh, spring grass sprouts and budding trees had long ago been evicted from our rapidly expanding town and confined to the pastures and fields outside the town gates. The streets were just beginning to thaw, the steps of man and beast returning to the fields had left the mud roads a soggy mess. Despite the bright sunlight and chirping birds, the town seemed desolate and lifeless.

The walk to Nora's house, a small faded wooden cottage tucked tight against the town's east wall, didn't take long, despite Marlee's lagging pace. She fought me the first few blocks, but I convinced her that facing Nora was the most prudent course. She was not, however, an enthusiastic companion.

I walked smartly up the three rickety steps to Nora's porch and banged loudly on the wooden door. Marlee stayed back, but, sighing, came up beside me when I gestured for her.

There was no answer, so I banged again. Still no answer.

I pushed the door open, not knowing what to expect.

The one-room interior was exactly as I'd remembered it from our lessons years before, swept clean and kept neat. Clusters of every imaginable herb hung in rows from the rafters, which sagged perhaps a little more now than they used to. The stone hearth was barren, despite the fact that spring was newly arrived and the air still a bit chill for old bones. Row after row of shelves were full to brimming with blown glass bottles, filled with all sorts of tinctures, powders, and essential oils.

Nora sat at her work table, herbs and

Artwork by Allison Hershey

an array of glass bowls and utensils spread before her. Her brazier sent a thin trail of smoke into the air. She smiled her toothless grin at us as we stepped in.

"I knew you'd come."

I ignored her. "Nora, why would you threaten Marlee's baby?"

Nora ignored me. "Do you know what I've got here, girls? Do you remember your lessons well? Ragwort. Lady's Slipper. Sage. Birthwort." As she named each herb, she broke off an appropriately sized piece, traced a sign in the air, and dropped it into the glass bowl. "A glass mortar and pestle for purity, and a searing flame ..."

Marlee moaned and reeled backwards. Smoke from the burning herbs began to fill the cottage. Marlee's moan grew sharper, and she bent over double.

I really didn't remember this spell — as I mentioned, I wasn't exactly a quick study when it came to herb-spells — but I knew enough to grasp the general gist of the spell. If it continued, Marlee would abort.

My mind worked furiously as my eyes scanned the room. Just strangling Nora, as I was very inclined to do at the moment, wouldn't help. The spell was already cast, and would outlive its maker. Somehow, I had to break the spell.

I jumped up, snagging a bunch of rose hips hanging just out of easy reach, then leapt for some jasmine and pennyroyal. I quickly plucked a long brown hair from Marlee's braid, which, as she was doubled over and concentrating on her cramping abdomen, she didn't even notice.

I traced the signs quickly and crumbled the herbs in my hands. It would have been better to use the glass mortar and pestle, but my skill was so slight that I wanted the personal contact. Nora sat still, watching me.

Striding to Nora's work table, I stood across from her, staring at her defiantly. With every fiber in my body, I willed my herb-spell to work. I held my hand over the small flame, ignoring the heat, and let the crumbled leaves tumble from my hand and catch fire.

A tingling ran up my spine, jangling nerves as it went. There was an inau-

Artwork by Allison Hershey

dible pop, and the tingling left, except for in the tips of my fingers and toes.

To my surprise and relief, the smoke cleared immediately from the cottage. Nora threw back her head and laughed.

I glanced at Marlee to be sure she was all right. She was getting to her feet. Her brow glistened with sweat, but her cramping had definitely stopped.

I curled my fingers into tight fists, forcibly ignoring the pleasant, incessant prickling which threatened to make me giddy. I turned back to Nora, mustering the anger which had briefly receded. I'd never hissed in my life, but I did now. "I ought to kill you, old woman."

Nora stopped laughing. "You cast a true spell, Sarla. A very hard spell."

"How could you try to hurt Marlee, Nora? How? She was your favorite student. Teacher's pet. And you tried to kill her baby!" My voice was rising to a hysterical level. "Has your brain shriveled as much as your body?"

Nora's eyes narrowed slightly at the insult. "No. You know I would never hurt anyone, especially not Marlee." She turned to Marlee, leaning trembling against the open doorway. Her voice became the crisp, teaching voice she had always used with me. "You should have studied harder, Sarla. I didn't use birthwort in that spell." She smiled and held a twig of dried herb out toward Marlee. "It was bloatleaf."

"What?" I didn't get it. I'd forgotten too much herb lore.

Marlee smiled tenuously and sidled over to the work table. She took the twig from Nora, and her smile widened.

"Will someone please let me in on the joke?" I was still worked up, and this little exchange wasn't helping anything.

"Bloatleaf, Sarla. Nora didn't give me birthing cramps — she gave me gas." Marlee's smile twisted itself around and her dark eyebrows knit together. "But why, Nora? Why? It's not really a very funny joke. I've been sick with worry."

Nora's frown matched Marlee's. "It's not a joke, girls. I cast a telling-spell for the coming year, as I do every spring. There's plague moving across the country. It will be here by winter."

Marlee drew in a sharp breath and put her hand on her belly.

"I'm too old to survive it, no matter how many herb-spells are wasted on me. And I have no successor to treat the rest of the town after I fall."

Marlee stepped around the table and knelt by Nora. She took the old, wizened hands into her young ones.

"Nora, you didn't have to trick us here. Of course I'll train with you! All you had to do was ask!"

Nora smiled at the girl who had always been her favorite student. "I know you would, dear. But you don't have the skill we need. You're very good, but unfortunately, your cycle isn't quite right for the major spells. You'll never be able to master anything greater than simple predictions, midwifery, and home remedies. I'm sorry. You couldn't ever stop a plague, no matter how hard you tried." Her voice was gentle to soften the blow. "It's Sarla I need to train."

My jaw dropped, and speech eluded me. Marlee filled the gap.

"Sarla! But she can't even do the simplest castings! She's hopeless with herb-magic!"

I would have said the same, but it stung, nonetheless. "Your vote of confidence is overwhelming."

Marlee started, flushing bright red. "I'm sorry, Sarla, but it's true. You've never had a single herb-spell work!"

"Oh?" I felt myself getting mad again, and tried to remind myself that Marlee was my best friend. "And who just saved your baby with her amazingly cast personal safety spell, hm? Perhaps, when the chips are down ..." I stopped. Very slowly, I shifted my eyes from Marlee to Nora. "That's why you did this isn't it? To force my hand."

Nora nodded. "You've always had the skill within you, Sarla. You just never wanted it. I think maybe you're afraid of it. I had to put you into a situation where making a spell work was, for just a minute, the most important thing in the world to you. It's that kind of single-mindedness that makes an herb-spell work." Nora sighed. "I didn't want to force you, Sarla. I would have let you go — I was holding out for an apprentice who wanted it.

"Your life is yours, Sarla. I don't want to force you to be something you aren't. But there's a plague coming, and I won't make it through. I have the whole town to think of. I'm sorry, but I don't feel like we have a choice."

I sighed, defeated. "No, we don't. I'm sorry, Marlee. I know how you love herb-magic. I didn't ask for this."

Marlee put on a brave face. "I know. Besides, maybe I could help you some. Be your assistant, maybe. I can definitely help with your lessons, until you get ahead of me." She turned to Nora. "Would that be all right?"

Nora smiled, and kissed the top of Marlee's head. "Of course, pet. I did a reading for your baby before I started all this, you know. He'll be a fine, strong boy, with curly brown hair like yours and big muscles like his father. Now, why don't you run and tell Bryant the good news? He's plowing in the north field. Sarla and I have work to do."

"I will." Marlee's smile lit her whole beautiful face. "Thank you."

She turned to leave, but stopped at the door. "Nora, how did you know I was pregnant before I did?"

Nora's expression turned smug. "An herb-mage always knows, dear. Now, go, go! Off to your husband!"

Marlee grinned and left, closing the door behind her. Nora waited until her running footfalls receded in the distance.

My fingers were still tingling from the herb-spell, and now that I was no longer angry or confused — or at least, a lot less so — I was surprised at how good the spell casting had felt. The giddiness I'd forced down earlier flowed back in a dizzying rush. I'd always hated herb classes, but perhaps that was because I'd never cast a true spell before, never felt the tingling energy running through me. I wanted to feel it again. I was eager to begin.

"Have a seat, Sarla. We have little time and much to do."

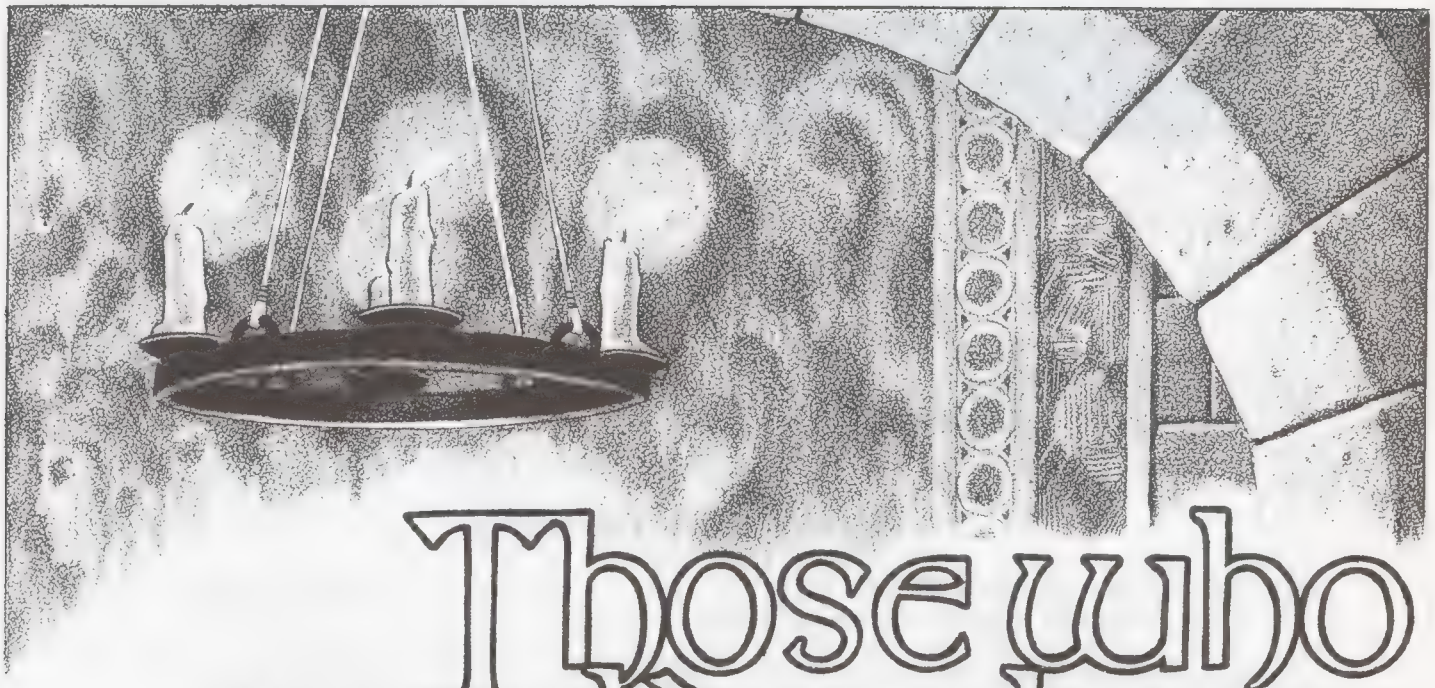
Yes, we most certainly did.

❄

Juli Lynn Gioia writes "I have had my nose in a book since before I could read, but I first decided that I wanted to write when I was about 12 years old when I read S&S II. Although I majored in English in High School and took two years worth of enrichment courses for writing, you have inspired and taught me far more than anyone else through the story introductions in the S&S series and your magazine. I only began writing seriously about two years ago. This is my first sale."

Allison Fiona Hershey is an eclectic artist and writer living in Southern California. Her published work has graced computer software covers, and science fiction and fantasy publications. She recently returned from a European trip to study artwork abroad (though unfortunately the trip was cut short by illness).

Artwork by George Barr



Those who would be kings

by Julia Watts

The candle guttered as a sudden gust of breeze pushed its way through the window, tousling the seeress's hair and forcing a low hiss from between her lord's teeth. She turned to face him, gray eyes fixed carefully on his face. He pursed his lips but did not say one word about the draft. "Melanai," he began, his voice struggling to control a shadow of the authority it commanded in the rest of the castle, "I wish to know the fate of tomorrow's battle."

She watched him carefully, her gaze smoothing over the worry lines puckering his face. If she had told him once that the future was a malleable entity, subject to the whim of neither king nor cleric, she had told him a thousand times. Something else troubled him. "Why?" she asked.

Elsewhere such impudence would have been punished. Not here. He fingered the fringe of his tunic absently, considering her question with more respect than he would have afforded his minister of war. "Because my combat with the Duke of Strainden is only to bring me to prominence in the eyes of the king." He kept his eyes high but turned away from her gaze. "If I die tomorrow by his hand, I will gain nothing." Then, almost sharply, "What do your stones say?"

His fear filled the room with a thick bitterness she could taste. She looked up at the man who did not have the stomach to be king and wondered if he had a good king's heart. "Nothing that you cannot see for yourself."

Anger twisted his features into a harder mask. "I do not indulge you for your skill at riddles, seeress. What of my fate tomorrow?"

She felt the cooling breath of the north wind on the back of her neck when she answered. "Death comes for all men. If you tempt him rashly, he may come before his due, but if you live in his fear, he will take your soul."

"Seeress," he whispered, eyes mirroring despair, "do I die tomorrow?"

"Death is the fate of all men," she said, her voice tempered by his trembling, "the fate of all who would be king, m'lord."

He spun away from her, his breath coming in sharp pants. In her tower he was not a Duke vying for a kingdom, only an ordinary mortal sharply aware of his mortality. "Then it is true."

"You shall not die in battle with the Duke." He turned, his eyes examining her face. He did not believe her. He would die, else she would have told him otherwise before. He knew and she saw that knowledge written on his face as he left her tower. There was fear stenciled in the eyes, a fear deep enough to still the body and stop the heart.

She left her tower before dawn to pay her last respects. If they wondered at her somber black before the news had spread, they did not say a word. She was a seeress, after all, and they dared not question. At her approach, the others faded from the dead king's side and only one remained by the bedside. It was whispered that she could send a man to the grave with a single word and they dared not take the risk.

"Did y'tell him it would be so, Lady?" The girl clutched her fists around the edges of the mourning dress.

"No, child," Melanai said gently, her eyes falling upon the still face, "it was your lord who told himself." And slowly, with the dignity of an exiled queen, she retired to her tower where she could sit with her stones and listen to the tellings of the wind. There were other men who would be king.

❄

Julia Watts is eighteen years old and lives in Pittsburgh.

George Barr has been a professional artist since 1960.

Artwork by George Barr

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The Last Word

The three important things this issue are: we have a virtual domain now, so you can reach us on the web at www.mzbfm.com. (This is noticeably simpler to remember than our old domain name, though of course we still have a zillion business cards with the longer address.) We've had a story qualify for the preliminary Nebula ballot, Kathleen Massie-Ferch's "United Powers", from issue 33. And our cover is the result of an interesting collaboration between Alicia Austin and George Barr, with Alicia Austin in the role of the queen with too many things to do all at once and George Barr in the role of rescuer-on-a-white-horse. (As you might suspect, the artists have been friends for years.) George enjoyed the challenge so much, he has suggested they do it again, "not as an emergency measure, but because the combined effort might be worth it." (Just to keep things clear, let me state that Alicia did all the interior illustrations.)

Marion has personal news: she is now a proud grandmother, her daughter Moira (and Moira's husband, of course) having produced a son. Some days it's hard to know if she's prouder of the magazine or her grandson.

We've purchased rights to publish a lovely Carl Lundgren piece for a cover, so you'll see that in a future issue.

I'm looking forward to the WorldCon (though not to San Antonio's heat — or will there be another flood while we're there?). I will be the editor of one issue of the daily zine, which should be an interesting challenge after the quarterly pace of this publication.

WesterCon was huge and seemed slightly over-programmed, though in fact none of my panels was attended by less than twenty people except the first one, held at 3 pm on Thursday before many folks even knew the con had started. I'm hoping to do another manuscript preparation workshop soon - the one I did at NorWesCon seemed very well-received. In the meantime, I will put in a shameless plug for a book in which I have a chapter: Steve Mettee's **PORTABLE WRITERS' CONFERENCE**, available in trade paperback at your local bookstore. So far I have received a zero dollar advance and one royalty check for $42, plus I sold two of the ten free copies I was given. One of the others went as a gift to my dad, who was impressed. (Which pleased me.) I think this brings my hourly wage for writing it up to about $2.47. (Luckily Marion pays me more handsomely than that. *Much* more handsomely — thank you, Marion.)

I hope you enjoyed the Di Fate interview; let me know what you think. We have never "done" an artist before, but I have never met an artist with the depth and breadth of knowledge that Vincent Di Fate brings to his work. Some of the artwork accompanying the article, and both of the photos, came to us courtesy of Charles N. Brown of *Locus*, who graciously let me disrupt his office not once but twice to scan artwork from his collection of magazines and hardcover books, and his files of photographs.

— *Rachel E. Holmen*

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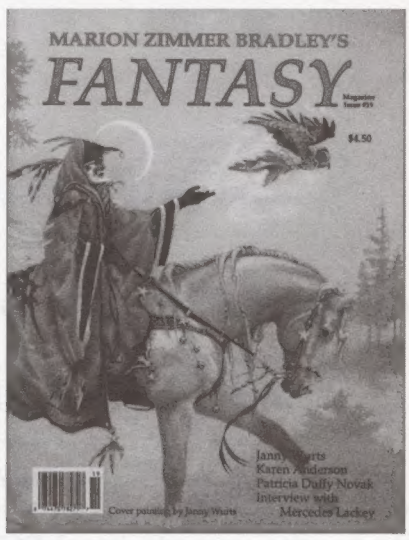

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The Cauldron — Issue #36

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❑ **North to Northwander** by Marion Zimmer Bradley	❑ Hannah Shapero
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❑ **I No Longer Own an Ax** by David J. Sosnowski	❑ Kaja Foglio
❑ **Portrait of My Wife** by Judy McCrosky	❑ Armand Cabrera
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❑ **A Slow Day in Hell** by Julia S. Mandala	❑ Barb Armata
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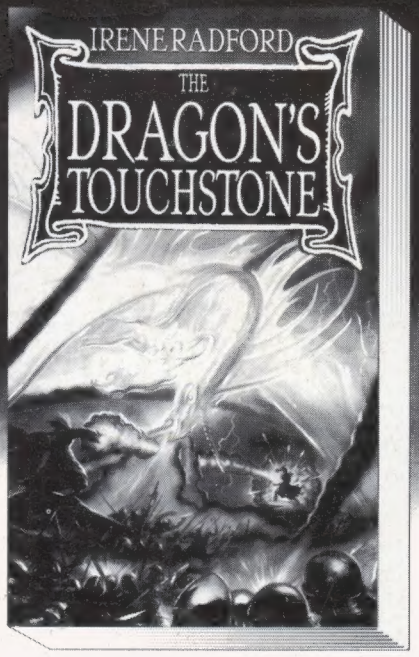

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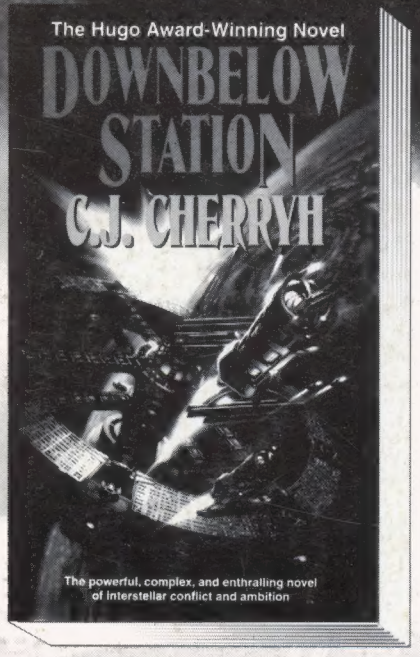
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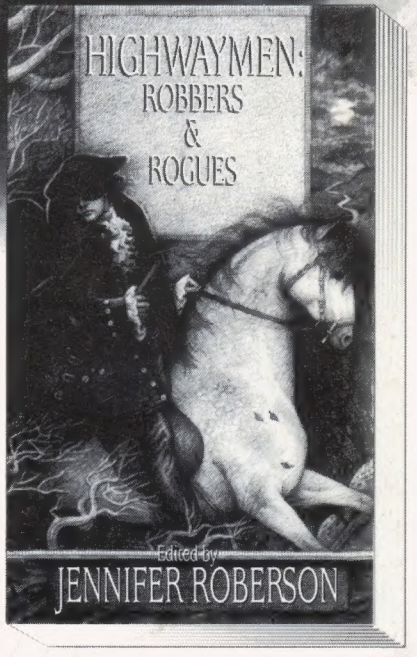

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